

Review

Ocherki po istorii russkoi tserkovnoi smuty
(*Essays on the History of Russian Church Troubles*)

by Anatoli Levitin* and Vadim Shavrov,
Institut Glaube in der 2. Welt, Küsnacht, Switzerland, 1978,
3 volumes in one, 1,054 pp. plus illustrations, 50 Swiss francs.

This is by far the most detailed and authoritative account in any language of the so-called Renovationalist movement, a major schism in the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1920s. One of the authors, Anatoli Levitin (often writing under the pseudonym of Krasnov), born in 1915, was formerly an active member of the movement, serving as a deacon in the Renovationalist Church and also as secretary to Metropolitan Alexander Vvedensky, one of the leaders of the movement. After Vvedensky's death in 1946, when this controversial movement ceased to exist, (*de facto* it had been dead for a decade) Levitin returned to the official Patriarchal Church as a layman. Renovationalist clerics could only be received back into the Patriarchal Orthodox Church as clergy if they repented and for some reason Levitin chose not to do this.

Levitin taught Russian literature and also contributed under his pseudonym to the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, the official monthly publication of the Church, which was resurrected in 1943. In 1959, when Khrushchev unleashed a new wave of anti-religious persecution in the USSR, Levitin began to write about this campaign in numerous apologetic articles and essays which were disseminated in *samizdat* form. He consequently lost his teaching post. He was attacked in the official Soviet atheist press in 1960, and under pressure from the secular authorities the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* refused to publish any further contributions by Levitin. It was at this point that Metropolitan Manuil, an outstanding leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, who had spent some 20 years in Soviet prisons and concentration camps, procured a generous grant from his diocesan funds for Levitin to write this book. His co-author Shavrov, son of a Soviet general and himself a distinguished officer in the Soviet army, was sent to the same concentration camp as Levitin after the Second World War. He was converted in the camp and baptized by Levitin. Together they produced this colossal book in two years. Naturally, it

*Levitin emigrated to Switzerland in 1974.

could not be published officially so it began to circulate in *samizdat*, in separate volumes and excerpts, from approximately 1963. Parts of it soon reached the West and were published in instalments in two Russian émigré journals during the 1960s (*Novy zhurnal* and *Grani*). Now for the first time the complete work is published.

It is an almost impossible task to write a coherent review of this multi-purpose work—an unruly encyclopaedia of sorts. It gives a factual historical account—sometimes chronological, sometimes thematic—interspersed with Levitin's personal recollections; it quotes press articles of the time as well as the texts of other documents; and offers comments and analysis, as well as much tedious moralizing and rather pedestrian philosophical and theological discourses by the author. To form a coherent picture of the schism the reader has to piece together the first-hand information which is plentiful, but distorted by the many personal interjections and the excessive documentary quotations.

The seeds of the schism were sown in the first decade of the 20th century when growing numbers of the Russian intelligentsia, disappointed with rationalism, positivism and materialism (particularly Marxism), began to return to the Church. This was a period when liberal reforms in general and the mood of the 1905 Revolution in particular had led many Russian theologians and members of the clergy and intelligentsia to hope that the Church could be freed from the petrifying embrace of the State. However, these reforming liberal elements clashed with the state bureaucracy when Nicholas II did not allow a Council (*Sobor*) of the Russian Orthodox Church to be held. Thus the election of a Patriarch (the last one had died in 1701) and the formation of a more autonomous church administration was delayed until after the February Revolution. Although by 1908 the most vocal of the clerical reformers had either been defrocked under the pressure of the state bureaucracy or effectively silenced, they later reappeared and reached full bloom in 1917 and thereafter.

In Russia, the first two decades of the 20th century—the Silver Age of Russian literature—witnessed an upsurge of mysticism and a fascination with spiritual matters. There were premonitions of an imminent cataclysm and expectations of a socialist utopia to be inaugurated by Nietzschean revolutionary supermen. Such trends also affected the Church, especially the neophytic intelligentsia within it and the “with-it” younger church intellectuals, for example, the “progressive” young professors of theology and liberal priests in the major university towns. The desire for a socialist utopia even penetrated as far as some traditional church circles, including a number of Old Believer bishops. Some of these men, including Levitin, saw Marxism as a social projection of Christianity. They thought that militant atheism was not an

integral part of Marxism but a legacy of the confusion made by Marx between the Church of Christ and the latter's control over the oppressed workers. In this way Alexander Vvedensky, one of the Renovationist leaders, rationalized Marx's failure to perceive a spiritual element within the creation. Vvedensky described Marxism as "the Gospel written in an atheist language". He and others like him believed that the militantly anti-Christian element within Marxism would eventually disappear under the benevolent influence of a "progressive" Christian-socialist Church.

Although this sums up the "ideological essence" of the Renovationalist schism, very few Renovationalists had in fact been Christian socialists before the Revolution; some of the leading "renovationists" had been extreme right-wingers and even anti-Semites. Perhaps the genuine Christian-socialist reformers were soon disillusioned by Soviet reality. Or were they pushed away from leading positions into obscurity by the regime, which preferred to deal with personalities who could be politically blackmailed and thus frightened into complete subservience?

At all events, a vile caricature of a Church was the result of this strange marriage between a church schism and a regime which aimed at the destruction of any faith in the supernatural. The book gives an accurate and detailed account of how the Renovationalists, failing to win mass support, tried to gain the trust and benevolence of the Soviet authorities by denouncing to the secret police priests and laymen loyal to the Patriarch. The Renovationalists were thus implicated in many arrests and even executions. The by-product of this inner decay was not only sycophancy but moral licence, careerism, quarrels and splits within the Renovationalists' own ranks. Isolated in the midst of a morally unscrupulous group, even the few genuine, long-standing and zealous church reformers were reduced to making denunciations.

Although the Renovationalist schism was legalized by the State, had its support and, at its apex in 1922, controlled approximately 80 per cent of all church buildings, and alone was permitted to publish journals and run seminaries, yet for all intents and purposes it ceased to exist within approximately 15 years of its foundation. God acted through the faithful laymen who refused to accept the schism. The schismatic churches stood empty and the priests in the provinces literally starved for lack of support from the parishioners, while the patriarchal churches were full. By the late '20s the regime itself, recognizing its failure to split the ranks of the believers, lost interest in the Renovationalists.

Even so, the schism caused considerable harm to the Russian Orthodox Church and its effects are felt to the present day. Firstly, for

example, many of the churches that had been transferred to the Renovationists were later closed or destroyed by the Soviet authorities on the pretext that believers did not attend services there. Secondly, it became impossible for the Patriarchal Church to introduce many sensible reforms (e.g. the introduction of the Gregorian Calendar, the replacement of Church Slavonic in services by the living Russian language, and liturgical reforms) although these had been conceived by the Church before the schism occurred, because such reforms had been advocated by the Renovationists. For the majority of believers such reforms were signs of the hated Renovatism. Thirdly, the structure of the Patriarchal Church had almost entirely disintegrated as a result of continual arrests and persecution which had been facilitated by the Renovationists' co-operation with the regime. By the late 1920s the Patriarchal Church was forced by this treatment to emulate the attitude of the Renovationists in the socio-political sphere. It began to praise the Soviet system and its "benevolent" attitude towards the Church, while her bishops, priests, and faithful were arrested and executed.

Thus the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church has inherited the two worst legacies of the past: ecclesiastical conservatism and stagnation from the pre-revolutionary Church, and the dishonest political sycophancy of the Renovationists. Had the Renovationists not compromised sensible reform, the Church today might have been a dynamic product of the best strains in both bodies, displaying the moral and socio-political steadfastness of Patriarch Tikhon and the healthy dynamism of the best in the genuine Renovatism circles. The Church as it exists in the USSR today suits the totalitarian regime. But its inability to lead the nation towards moral revival at a time when there is a moral vacuum left by the loss of belief in a social utopia, may have grave consequences for the Soviet Union and for the world at large.

In spite of its many weaknesses, this book is essential reading for any serious student of Russian society, culture and church history in the 1920s. It would also be of great value to those who still dream of fruitful Marxist-Christian dialogue and of co-operation between Christians and communists in a Marxist State. However, to reach such a wide readership the book would have to be not only translated but also carefully edited. If the numerous repetitions, personal interjections, moralizing and unnecessary details were eliminated and the lengthy quotations removed from the text to form appendices, the book could be reduced to approximately half its present length. This would make it easy to read, interesting, and highly informative.