

## Book Reviews

*The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness*, by Jane Ellis. London: Macmillan Press, in association with St Antony's College, Oxford, 1996. 203 pp.

Reading a book about the *perestroika* period is like reading the political diary of your own memory. The events are still so near and one can easily experience again the sensations of that exciting era. But at the same time one realises how different the contemporary situation has become from what we had hoped for at that time; and this perspective makes the *perestroika* era seem a far-away period of lost innocence. In *The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness*, Jane Ellis gives a lively account of the turbulent changes which affected religious life in late Soviet and early post-Soviet Russia. This is Ellis' second book. Ten years ago she published the first detailed description of the situation of the Russian Church; it contained much information which had been compiled from sources which were accessible only with difficulty. That book is still the best reference book for the period. In contrast to that first book, the second one is less sensational and revealing: the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s have been covered in the Russian media themselves and have been analysed in western periodicals, including the Keston publications. But Jane Ellis has put it all together and produced a systematic history of the reemergence of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The subtitle of the book makes it clear that the period of freedom placed the Russian Orthodox Church in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand it was the moral victor after 70 years of ideological struggle and repression by the state, and on the other hand the Church appeared unprepared for the new challenges. It lost both the attractiveness of forbidden fruit and its monopoly in the religious field. Competition and religious pluralism provoked a defensive attitude on the part of the Moscow Patriarchate, while at the same time the church leadership tried to cope with new social and organisational problems.

The author describes the developments in the religious field in seven chapters, beginning with the relaxation in the ideological attitude towards religion in 1987, which was a consequence of the policy of *glasnost*' and the coinciding millennium commemoration of Russian Christianity, and concluding with the attempts in the mid-1990s to amend the law on religious freedom of 1990. The final outcome of this five-year struggle in the Russian parliament, with the passing of the new law in 1997, could not be included in the book (which ends in early 1996). However, every other aspect of church life during the Gorbachev and early Yel'tsin period is dealt with in the book in a systematic way: the initially ambivalent changes in state policy towards religion; the first activities of the Church in the educational and social fields; the changes and non-changes in church government; the new cooperation between church and state; the critical debates on church matters in the media. This period,

which has often misleadingly been called a religious renaissance, appears in fact to be no religious success story but a difficult period of recovery with contradictory phenomena of positive changes and missed opportunities, religious enthusiasm and frustration. The book is a balanced history with a great deal of factual information.

On some points, however, information is incomplete: the description of spiritual life in the monasteries is much too idyllic (pp. 69–70). Some monasteries have developed dubious ideological publishing activities and seem more concerned with nationalistic than with religious revival. The same can be said about the Orthodox brotherhoods, which are not mentioned at all. Also one-sided is the description of the activity of Metropolitan Kirill. Once an active supporter of ecumenism, he has changed his views in a nationalistic direction, as has become evident, for example, from his speeches to the Russian World Assembly (*Vsemirny Russky Sobor*) and the armed forces, and in his strong advocacy of the new law on religious freedom. Although Metropolitan Kirill is moderate in this respect compared to, say, the late Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg, he can no longer be characterised as ‘an accomplished diplomat and ecumenist’ (p. 108).

I disagree with Jane Ellis’ evaluation of the delicate problem of the Church’s attitude towards its own Soviet past. The problem is not ‘probably unresolvable’ and it is not a conflict between ‘maximalists and more cautious commentators’ (p. 145). The Patriarchate does not necessarily need to disclose its archives (the Vatican has not done so yet with regard to its attitude in the Second World War) in order to solve the problem to a certain degree. A frank letter by Patriarch Aleksii or a serious declaration by the Holy Synod on the question could do a great deal to allay controversy: meanwhile ignoring the issue or remaining silent only makes things worse.

My last critical remark concerns the section at the end of the book on self-analysis by Russian Orthodox believers. Here the author goes too fast through the complex material. Much more could be said about the influence of the religious philosophers of the beginning of the century on the Russian intelligentsia in the late 1980s. In fact the book should have started with the rediscovery of *Vekhi* by the Soviet intelligentsia. The *Vekhi* authors played a more fundamental role in reevaluating religion and changing the spiritual climate in Russia than the popular novel by Aitmatov.

Finally, one practical remark. It would be good to have this book translated into Russian. The separate facts are all well known in Russia and since 1991 a series (*Materialy po istorii Tserkvi*, 16 volumes so far) is doing a good job in catching up on church historiography in Russia; but there still exists no survey of the recent history of the Church. Jane Ellis’ book would fill this gap admirably.

WILLIAM VAN DEN BERCKEN

*Christian Thinking and the End of Communism in Russia*, by William van den Bercken. Utrecht–Leiden: Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (IIMO Research Publication 34), 1993. 154 pp.

In this collection of essays, written between 1989 and 1992, William van den Bercken looks at the nature of Russia’s Christian revival in the twentieth century and its relation to the collapse of communism. Central to his perspective is the Christian humanist tradition associated with *Vekhi* (1909), its sequel *Iz glubiny* (1918), and the later *Iz-pod glyb* (1974). Rightly, van den Bercken describes this tradition as ‘postcommunism avant la lettre’ (p. 5); undoubtedly, much of Russia’s twentieth-

century Christian thought is a reaction to Marxist ideology. Van den Bercken then charts the rise of this Christian humanist current in the Russian intelligentsia during the 1980s, and presents a wealth of material from literature and the press to show how intellectuals sought an alternative moral and spiritual outlook at a time when communism was collapsing. He states that although there was not a causal relation between the demise of communism and the reevaluation of Christianity, the renewed interest in Christianity did play a role in bringing down communism 'as a way of thinking' (p. 7).

It is interesting to reflect on van den Bercken's analysis five years on. He was right to note that the religious reorientation in Russia was a 'phenomenon of contradictions'. For some, the turn to Christianity was authentic, but for others it was a matter of style or political expediency, or something of a fad (p. 134). The very uneven nature of Russia's Christian history in the last few years testifies to that. Van den Bercken is also struck by the originality of the Christian revival: 'What makes this process so fascinating is that in it christian ideas and values acquire an unexpected originality and constitute an intellectual challenge that can inspire christianity in the secularized West' (p. 130). That is true, and is perhaps well illustrated by films like Abuladze's *Repentance*, which touched great heights of creativity and spirituality and were at the same time able to engage a wider Russian population in a discussion about the nation's past. Such a thing is rare in the West, where we are less conscious of our own need. On the other hand, the religious revival of the late Gorbachev era has not borne fruit in the way that it promised, and that raises questions about how profound it really was. How far did it have an impact on the lives and behaviour of the Russian intelligentsia as well as on their ideas? The turn to Christianity at an intellectual level was not immediately accompanied by a turn at a moral level. Yet could it have been otherwise? An adequate understanding of Russia's spiritual history, especially after such a phenomenon as Soviet communism, demands a long-term perspective.

Van den Bercken was also right in saying that with the collapse of communism the Orthodox Church would be tempted down the path of 'ideologisation' and a national state-church alliance (pp. 138-40). That has indeed been the story of the last few years, and is likely to remain so for some time. I am glad that van den Bercken paid attention to the subtle differences between thinkers in this area. The 'state-patriotic' tradition of Il'in, Kartashev and Florensky is not the same as the moderate Slavophilism of *Vekhi* (p. 77). Russians themselves, as well as western critics, do not always notice the differences between these traditions, possibly because they sometimes overlap.

Van den Bercken's book is stimulating for another reason. In its broad sweep, it is an attempt to see a nation's spiritual development across a century. It is a reminder that there is a prophetic aspect to the writing of history. History can be a study of man's relationship with God. I was struck by the reference to Korsakov's article in *Iz-pod glyb*, where Korsakov looks at Russian history from the point of view of Divine Providence and suggests that, as with Job, God was testing Russia (p. 68). An underlying aspect of van Bercken's interesting and useful collection of essays is a prophetic attempt to read Russian history in the light of Russia's spiritual struggles. It is to be commended.

PHILIP BOOBYER