



Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole (eds): *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 752 pp.

The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought examines the varying trends and traditions within Russian religion over a period of more than a thousand years, focusing primarily on the last two hundred. It is a comprehensive anthology, including chapters written by specialists in various fields of theology, philosophy, the history of ideas, cultural studies, linguistics, etc. As emphasized in the *Introduction*, the subject is not religion(s) *in Russia*, but explicitly Russian religious *thought*. This means, its subject matter is specifically *Russian* religious thought, as distinct from European (or Eurasian) and Christian or monotheistic thought in general. Second, it is about religious *thought*, which here more precisely means such thinking and reflections that are expressed and conveyed in writing available for a wide circle of readers.

The handbook embraces 750 pages and includes 40 chapters. I shall comment in this review on only a few examples of the themes treated. The criteria for my choice have been my own main interest and scholarly competence, in combination with what I think may be useful for readers from several different fields. Both criteria are clearly very subjective.

I shall start with a summary of the outline. The first part, *Historical Contexts*, gives an overview of the

main historical periods, starting with the conversion of early Rus' to Orthodoxy in the ninth and tenth centuries, continuing through complicated and sometimes turbulent times until the nineteenth century. Parts II and III discuss in more detail the changes during the nineteenth century and after the Russian Revolution. In Part II, *The Nineteenth Century*, important theological thinkers like Petr Chaadaev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Soloviev are discussed separately, alternating with thematic chapters on issues such as the clerical academies, Slavophilism, and nihilism. Part III focuses on the period between 1900 and 1922, with chapters on important trends like religious idealism, *theosis*, mysticism, and reflections on transcendence. There is also a chapter on Judaism. Chronologically, Part IV continues with the early Soviet era, with chapters on 'musical metaphysics', icons, and poetry, and is followed by Part V, which discusses Russian religious thought outside Russia. Part VI presents analyses of religious thought in Soviet Russia, with chapters on religious thinking in the Silver Age, prison camps, Russian cinema, and the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin. Finally, the three chapters in Part VII summarize historical trends and recurring themes and reflect on the influence of Russian religious thinking on Western theology and the role of Christian thought in Russian cultural history through the centuries.

The thorough analyses of the dynamic nineteenth century in Part II offer various perspectives invaluable

able for understanding political and cultural trends and conflicts, as well as the historical contexts of authors like Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. Victoria Frede examines the influence of nihilism on nineteenth-century Russian philosophy and literature, and in another chapter Randall A. Poole discusses the impact of Slavophilism on the development of Russian religious philosophy, observing that the roots of Slavophilism can be found in both European romanticism and patristic theology and explaining characteristic traits such as personalism and communal love ('sobornost'). For the Slavophiles, Poole observes, Russia's history and culture were distinct from the more legal and rationalistic theology of the West, enabling Orthodox theology to cultivate other traits such as spirituality and communal love with romantic ideas of Old Russia as a model characterized by an ideal of mutual non-interference between the state and the people.

Rebecca Mitchell examines religious themes in Dostoyevsky's novels, which have influenced religious thought both in Dostoyevsky's time and even more in the twentieth century. Here, themes of suffering, redemption, and not least the figure of Christ are explained in the light of both Russian Orthodox theology and Dostoyevsky's personal life. Taking the reader through the author's understanding of Christian soteriology and eschatology, Mitchell concludes that Dostoyevsky's authorship has been important for Russian culture both in modernizing

religious thinking and at the same time resisting the possibly negative aspects of (Western) modernity. Caryl Emerson discusses Tolstoy's rather complicated and seemingly contradictory religious approach, especially focusing on the author's crises followed by his conversion to religious anarchism and finally his expulsion from the Russian Orthodox Church. Tolstoy's ideas on death and a possible afterlife are explicated as partly influenced by Platonic philosophy, whereas, according to Emerson, ideas in his thinking that may point to Buddhist or even Taoist influence are more likely understood as expressions of mystical ideas stemming from Judaeo-Christian monotheistic belief in its own right.

In Part III, *The Religious-Philosophical Renaissance, 1900–1922*, the chapter 'God-Seeking, God-Building, and the New Religious Consciousness' by Erich Lippman explains developments of atheist thinking in the decades prior to and immediately following the Russian Revolution. God-seeking was built on the emphasis on man being the image of God and having the capacity to be genuinely god-like in this life. The God-builders had an almost opposite outlook, claiming that it was necessary to create a new God, built on human ground: 'anthropotheists'. The doctrine of 'theosis' stems from early Greek patristic theology and is in turn closely related to mysticism. The concept has been present throughout Russian Christian thinking and

was also taken up especially by lay Christian thinkers in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the idea being that the goal should and could be an actual transformation to godlikeness: not symbolically but ontologically. In Ruth Coates words: 'It is not enough to imitate Christ in his virtues (indeed for some thinkers this is not required at all): only participation in his divine nature (or that of Sophia) will do'. In 'Judaism and Russian Religious Thought' Dominic Rubin examines, first, attitudes to Jews and Judaism among non-Jewish authors and philosophers, including antisemitic themes present not least in writings influenced by romanticism and religious conservatism, and second, examples of Jewish thinkers who in various ways formulated particularly Russian interpretations of Judaism. The author concludes that despite the more or less ever-present, or at least recurring anti-Jewish attitudes and even antisemitism, there was also still room for specifically Jewish religious thinking to be expressed and reformulated, even in the early Soviet period.

In Part IV the cultural fields of music, poetry and visual arts are examined as areas for the aesthetic expression of spirituality, with examples from Late Imperial and twentieth-century music, poetry, and the visual arts, offering interesting perspectives not least on a period which was often viewed from the outside primarily as technocratic and atheistic. In the final chronological part 'Religious thought in Soviet

Russia', focusing mainly on the second half of the twentieth century, Caryl Emerson offers an analysis of what she sees as a religious subtext in Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory. Bakhtin was certainly not in his own view or any traditional and strict sense a 'religious thinker', but Emerson is not alone in identifying what she labels a 'religious subtext' in his literary thinking, which she analyses in terms of personalism and 'self-other' relations in the spirit of Martin Buber. If religious aspects are subtle in Bakhtin's thinking, it is no doubt more explicit in Andrei Tarkovsky's art, discussed by Alina Birzache in her chapter on cinema, in which she examines spirituality and messianism in the art of Tarkovsky and later filmmakers, finding an increasingly individualized spirituality in Russian film in the post-Soviet era especially.

The final part, *Assessment*, brings the handbook together. The present reviewer recommends readers to read the whole book, but if this is impossible, it might be a good idea to concentrate on these three chapters, which provide exactly what they promise: an assessment of the central ideas and cultural themes that have formed Russian religious thought through the ages, such as Gnosticism, sobornost, and theosis. Paul Valliere reflects on the influence of Russian religious thinking in the West through emigration following the Revolution, the role Russian Orthodox thinkers played in twentieth-century ecumenical dialogue, and their influence on important move-

ments and thinkers in both Catholic and Protestant thinking. The final chapter, written by Igor I. Evlampiev, brings the history together again, from the ninth century until today. Here, the author concludes that the religiously formulated hope to unite the divine and the human can be found in a wide variety of expressions throughout Russian religious thinking, whether expressed in theological terms as theosis or in anthropological analyses and political programmes. Although the chapter's emphasis is on Christianity's central place in Russian society and history, the author also concludes that even for thinkers like Berdyaev, Semyon Frank, and Andrei Tarkovsky, Christian teaching has in fact been understood and expressed as a teaching primarily about the human being's divine nature.

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