

## LETTERS

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To the Editor:

It is a welcome change to have most of *Slavic Review's* Winter 1993 issue dedicated to aspects of Russian religious history; a subject of great interest in all postcommunist European states, much too long neglected by American academe, although its importance has been evident to a small minority of perceptive scholars as far back as the 1960s. The purpose of this letter, however, is not to moralize on the importance of the subject but to draw attention to some controversial assertions and omissions in Roy Robson's very interesting "Liturgy and Community among Old Believers, 1905–1917" (*SR* 52, no. 4 [1993]: 713–24).

It is a pity Robson did not reveal to the reader the fascinating personality of the author of his epigraph: the "Old Believer Bishop Mikhail" who was a self-proclaimed Christian socialist of Jewish background, Mikhail Semenov, a professor at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy of the regular "Nikonian" Orthodox Church, tonsured monk by the then rector of that school, Bishop Sergii (Stragorodskii), a leading theologian and a restorer of the Orthodox patristic tradition and the future controversial head of the Russian Orthodox Church (1925–1944). Fr. Mikhail authored and published a "Programme of Russian Christian Socialists" and numerous radical brochures under such titles as "Christ in the Age of Machines," for instance. It was during the post-1907 reaction that he went over to the Old Ritualists and was consecrated a bishop; but in the early 1920s, apparently frustrated by the reality of socialism, he committed suicide.

Another fascinating figure was Prince Andrei Ukhtomskii, a graduate of a military cadet college, he forsook a military career for the study of theology at the Moscow Theological Academy. Consecrated bishop in the "Nikonian" Church in 1907, he became a radical critic of the existing control of the Church by the state, a supporter of the left-of-center political parties and an advocate of Christian socialism. Bishop Andrei greeted the February 1917 revolution with enthusiasm; after the bolshevik victory he favored civic loyalty but complete independence of the Church from the state and condemned all forms of subordination of the Church to the state. In and out of prisons, he categorically rejected Metropolitan Sergii's 1927 accommodation with the state as abdication of Church freedom and as a bunch of lies. Released from a three-year stint of imprisonment in 1931, he joined the Moscow Old Ritualist Pokrovskii Cathedral in 1932 because of its independence from Sergii's 1927 declaration. In 1937 he was executed by the order of an NKVD troika.

A much larger number of like-minded Church reformers remained in the main-line Orthodox Church, e.g. Sergii Bulgakov, Florenskii and all the other participants in the so-called Russian Religio-philosophic Renaissance, as well as the St. Petersburg group of 32 priests, some of whom would join the Renovationists in the early 1920s; or the sensational Optina monk Serapion Mashkin (a former naval officer) who condemned the whole post-petrine Church and clergy as uncanonical but remained within that Church nevertheless.

Bishops Mikhail and Andrei were examples of politically and socially radical Old Ritualists (I have not made a thorough study of the subject; perhaps Robson knows other cases among the clergy) who were characteristically not "native" Old Ritualists but defectors from the established Church. Two things attracted them to the Old Ritualists (Bishop Andrei had been a great sympathizer of Old Ritualists before the revolution as well and was devising means for a reunion of the two currents of Orthodoxy): their spirit of defiance and freedom from the post-petrine enslavement of the Church; and, yearning to restore the true theological legacy of the early Church fathers, they admired the Old Ritualists' freedom from the Kievan (Mokhila's) latinized and protestantized post-seventeenth-century theory of the established Church.

Now, thanks to several relatively recent studies (the newest and one of the most competent being the late Sergei A. Zenkovskii's *Russia's Old Believers* [surprisingly ignored both by Robson and by Robert Crummey's "Old Belief as Popular Religion. . ." (*SR* 52, no. 4:700–12)], we know that in the seventeenth-century controversy and schism the Old Ritualists were correct from the point of view of the Orthodox theological legacy to a greater extent than were the "Nikonians." Moreover, there is a logical connection between the above mentioned twentieth-century Orthodox-turned-Old Ritualist frame of mind and the early leaders of the Old Ritualists, such as Nasedka, Neronov and others. They ran the official Church-State Printing House; during their leadership the volume and variety of books published (that included translations of the latest west European scientific texts in all walks of life) remained unsurpassed

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probably until the 1760s. These learned clergymen had begun as advocates of a proper correction of texts but wanted to do it in a truly scholarly fashion by collecting the most authentic manuscripts from the Balkans and the middle east, as well as Russia. What they revolted against was that Nikon, instead of relying on such manuscripts, took the latest Greek and Ukrainian books for his models—the former had been published by Roman-Catholic Eastern Rite monks in Venice; the latter, by the latinized Kievan Academy based on Roman Catholic scholasticism.

If we look at the so-called Russian Religio-Philosophic Renaissance of the twentieth century, to which undoubtedly belonged Bishops Mikhail and Andrei, its driving elements likewise included the rediscovery of the pre-seventeenth-century Orthodox patristic tradition. The Old Ritualists preserved parts of it, particularly the theologically correct iconography and music, and the defiance of state control of the Church.

The problem with the Old Ritualists, however, has been that, having become a sect preoccupied with self-preservation, they have indulged in a ghetto-like self-conservation, precluding any new theological insights, any probings beyond a strict preservation of the ritual. Thus I think that Roy Robson is wrong in his assertion of a “development and spread of the Old Believer movement” in modern times. There was indeed a rather considerable growth among the lower classes; however, as far as the upper rungs of the Old Believer merchants (the founders of Russian capitalism) are concerned, by the early twentieth century most of them were shifting into the regular Orthodox Church or the *edinoversy*, the wing of the established Orthodox Church preserving the Old Ritual.

As far as our own days are concerned, the Old Ritualist sects have become tiny and show no signs of significant growth, if any. In contrast to the prerevolutionary situation, those in contemporary Russia who are attracted to the Old Ritualists are the most reactionary, are those who worship the ritual in a pagan fashion as aim-in-itself. They are also retrograde politically and socially. This is logical: for today, since the only theological treasures preserved by the Old Ritualists, the icon and old Church music (the *znamenny* chant), have been accepted by the regular Orthodox Church, they have nothing to offer but five- or six-hour-long, repetitious Church services in poorly understood Church Slavonic; whereas the advanced elements in the Orthodox Church are struggling for the use of spoken Russian in place of Church Slavonic.

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Professor Robson replies:

Professor Pospelovsky makes three points in regard to “Liturgy and Community among Old Believers, 1905–1917” and I’d like to reply to them in order. First, to the omission of biographies and works: I did not include personality profiles of anyone mentioned in my text, socialist Old Believer or otherwise, since that material did not relate to the liturgy. I have seen no evidence to indicate that the Old Belief was involved with socialist movements before or after 1905. In addition, I have used Sergei A. Zenkovskii’s work but did not cite it in an article of limited scope.

Second, to the growth of the Old Belief: I have seen no source, either archival or published, to indicate that upper-class Old Believers “were shifting into the regular Orthodox Church. . .” The Russian Orthodox Church’s yearbooks were silent on the issue, its missionary press did not trumpet any famous Old Believer conversions and statistical data suggest no such conclusion. To the contrary, recent research (by James West and others) has shown that an Old Believer “silver age” was led by Old Believer industrialists, especially P.P. Riabushinskii. I am sorry that Professor Pospelovsky did not cite his sources.

Finally, to the sentiments about contemporary Old Believer theology, ideology and politics: Professor Pospelovsky’s personal opinions relate in no way to “Liturgy and Community among Old Believers, 1905–1917.”

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Professor Crummey chooses not to reply.

To the Editor:

It is ironic that the article preceding Rossos’s “The British Foreign Office and Macedonian National Identity, 1918–1941” (*SR* 53, no. 2 [Summer 1994]: 369–94), discusses the post-1940 USSR strategy in Moldavia aimed at denationalization of the