

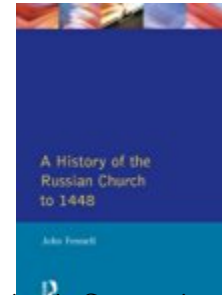
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Lister Illingworth Fennell. *A History of the Russian Church to 1488*. London: Longman, 1995. \$200.60 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-08068-3; \$44.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-08067-6.

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Soon after his retirement from teaching at Oxford, John Fennell undertook to write a history of the Russian Orthodox Church from its foundations into the sixteenth century. The manuscript remained unfinished at his death in 1992, but Fennell's publisher, with the assistance of his widow, colleagues, and friends, determined to publish the text that survived, adding bibliography and references as necessary (these tasks done by Wladimir Vodoff). The result is a satisfactory, if not always satisfying, survey that concentrates upon the church elite.

Fennell divided his consideration into two parts, the first of which treats the early history of Christianity, stretching from the pre-history of conversion to the arrival of the Tatars in the thirteenth century. In an introductory chapter devoted to Kievan politics, Fennell pronounces himself in favor of some controversial positions: he is a "Normanist," identifying the term 'Rus' with the Scandinavian Varangians, although he denies them any significant role in founding the Kievan state (4-5); he resists imputing any "system" to the politics of Rus' before 1054, asserting instead that "...the law of the jungle prevailed, ruler succeeding ruler by brute force" (12); Fennell also finds it difficult to think of Novgorod as a "republic" in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, despite the 1136 rebellion (18-19) and despite the contracts that Novgorod subsequently negotiated with its princes (*Gramoty*, 1949, nos. 1, 6, 14).

The heart of the prose, of course, concentrates upon the church. Fennell argues that well before 988 Kievan Rus' (which he repeatedly describes as "Russia") did know Christianity, even if Christians remained a minority. He argues that Askol'd and Dir, putative founders of Kiev, might have been Christians (23), that in Igor's time Christians worshipped at the Church of St. Elias (25),

and that Olga probably accepted baptism in Constantinople in 946 (26). All this activity could not have occurred without some clerical presence in Kiev. To the chronicle narratives of state conversion Fennell gives a novel reading. On fairly thin evidence, he argues that one Feofilakt arrived in Rus' in 987 to discuss a military alliance, conversion, and the marriage of Basil's sister to Vladimir (40). The stimulus for this course Fennell attributes to Vladimir himself, and dismisses the rhetorical narrative of religious competition. The reported attack on Cherson, however, Fennell thinks real, and explains by Vladimir's alliance with the Byzantine Emperor, in support of whom Vladimir marched against Cherson which had sided with Bardas Phocas (37, 39).

Perhaps most valuable of all the chapters in Part One is a survey of the organization of the "Russian" Church. Fennell makes little of the 1051 appointment of Ilarion, "...certainly not evidence of an attempt...to make the Russian Church independent of Constantinople..." (46). On the other hand, the consecration of Klim (1147) was most assuredly political, but not the result of scheming against the Patriarch (47). In this view neither Kievan Grand Prince nor Constantinopolitan Patriarch often interfered in the Kievan church. Although details remain sketchy, it appears that gradually new episcopacies arose throughout the Rus' lands. By the end of the eleventh century there might have been as many as nine bishoprics, and by the 1220s perhaps fifteen (52). Fennell makes no reference to Shchapov's latest work on this subject which provides a fuller and better grounded argument (Shchapov, 1989).

Given the fairly narrow source base, Fennell sometimes descends to very crude indicators by which to judge the expansion of Christianity. For example, he accepts

the order of magnitude, if not the precise figures, that Sapunov supplies, indicating that before the thirteenth century Rus' must have had some 2500 urban churches, 20,000-30,000 private chapels, and another 6,000 rural churches (Sapunov, 1955). Given that earlier Fennell had already admitted the slow growth of Orthodoxy in its first centuries, these figures ought to provoke surprise, but the text betrays no hint of disbelief (63). Only some pages later, after discussing the persistence of witchcraft, sorcery, animism and other phenomena, does Fennell concede that "...the Church appears to have made little headway in stamping out dvoeverie in the course of the first two-and-a-half centuries of Russian Christianity..." (88).

A brief chapter devoted to relations with the Latin Church makes the sensible point that there is no evidence of antipathy to Roman Christians in this era; indeed, Fennell rightly observes that the sources generally point in the opposite direction, that Kievan relations with Western Europeans were generally quite good, at least until the 1204 sack of Constantinople (103). Another chapter examines briefly the literature of Kievan Rus', noting that most of it was translated from Greek. Unlike some other students of this issue, however, Fennell does not condemn this borrowing, but instead praises it as being of "inestimable value" to a literature which was in any case largely "compilatory" (107) and superior by far to the literature of the subsequent era (112). The very brief, final chapter of Part One examines the church's role in Kievan politics, and determines that "...virtually all ecclesiastical intervention in lay affairs was limited to mediation and peace-keeping" (115). Oddly, Fennell makes no attempt to explain the financial and judicial guarantees that Kievan princes extended to the church, nor does he mention other civic responsibilities exercised by churchmen—for example, supervision of weights and measures, adjudication over marriage, sexual assault, witchcraft, sorcery, etc. (Shchapov, 1989, pp. 90-113).

Part Two begins with a cursory survey of the increasingly muddled politics in the era after the Tatar armies did their damage. Readers of Fennell's earlier works (Fennell, 1968, 1983) will find much that is familiar here, but novices in the world of pre-modern Russia may be put off by the catalog of proper nouns. Fennell judges the clerics of this era much more politically active than their Kievan predecessors (132). Selection of a new metropolitan inevitably turned political, given the competition between rival claimants to the Kievan see, by this time part of the Lithuanian Grand Principality. But internal politics in Moscow, Tver' and elsewhere had similar consequences. Politics also governs Fennell's discussion of

the Council of Florence and its outworkings in Muscovy; the deposition of Isidor, the Metropolitan who traveled to Italy to take part in the Council, and ultimately his replacement by Iona in 1448, bring to a close the political survey, examining the sometimes intricate connection between church contenders and the Muscovite civil war which raged in these years.

Of most interest to the general reader may be Fennell's retelling of relations between the Orthodox Church and the Tatar overlords in these centuries. Unsurprisingly, Fennell finds that the Church was a major beneficiary of Tatar toleration, retailing exemptions made explicit in immunity charters issued by successive Tatar khans. Of special moment is the assertion that the Muscovite princes, beginning with Vasilii I (1389-1425), attempted to diminish, rather than increase, church privileges by involving the clerics in payment of the Tatar tribute. "The Church...must have been alarmed at these...first groping attempts of grand-princely authority to infringe on the privileges bestowed upon them by the khans" (195). Perhaps it was, although Fennell does not consider that Vasilii I himself twice (1402, 1419) confirmed exemptions granted the Church in the Statutes of Vladimir and Iaroslav (Shchapov, 1976, pp. 183-85). In any case, Fennell finds unremarkable church texts that embellished the Tatars' reputation: "Again and again...we find a tendency to portray the Mongols not as evil-doers, not as anti-Christian, not even, at times, as the enemies of the Russians" (197). Only later, Fennell believes, after attitudes to the Tatars had changed in Muscovy, did churchmen make insertions into the sources which cast the one-time conquerors in an unfavorable light (203). Such an interpretation is hardly new with Fennell; several historians, like Charles Halperin (1985a, 1985b), for example, have attempted to rehabilitate the Tatars' impact upon early Muscovy, but one finds no reference to those works here.

Even though only two land grants to any monastery survive from the pre-Mongol period, Fennell thinks it "...rash to suggest, as some historians have done, that most monasteries in pre-Mongol Russia were indifferent to landownership and depended mainly on the generosity of their founders, patrons and benefactors" (72). He concedes, however, that the expansion of church landholding in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was much more rapid. Fennell mentions the main device by which church institutions, especially monasteries, gained their land—payment for prayers for the dead—but his text provides little specific evidence of this practice, leaving the reader to wonder at the source of this real estate. Instead, he focuses upon the maneuvers of the metropoli-

tans, especially Fotii whose “shrewd management and true business acumen” (213) Fennell recognizes. Additional, albeit indirect, evidence he finds in debates against church landholding, like that waged by the so-called Judaizers. Nevertheless, Fennell admits that neither Vasiliï I nor Vasiliï II “...is known to have given...a single kopeck, let alone an acre of land.” to the metropolitan (214).

A last chapter returns to politics, providing a detailed narrative of the interaction between various churchmen of the period and the princes, especially during the tumultuous Muscovite civil war. This sort of subject matter is clearly where Fennell’s heart lay, and despite the fact that he here provides considerable food for thought, the chapter does not serve well as a conclusion, and perhaps inevitably leaves the reader in mid-stream. A useful bibliography follows, although readers will find some bizarre inattention to alphabeticization in its arrangement; a single, rather pointless map precedes the index. Teachers might be forgiven for expecting additional material, such as a list of the grand princes or of the metropolitans; none of that here, however.

As a survey of church history, then, Fennell’s book will serve, especially for those interested mainly in the politics of the church elite. Of course, to have done much else would have been difficult, given the relative paucity of the surviving sources and their focus upon elite culture. To his credit, Fennell repeatedly warns the reader about limits implicit in the evidence: “it would appear” (7); “we do not know” (41); “it would seem in all probability” (59); “we cannot say for certain” (85), etc. All the same, a reader familiar with the original sources will be surprised at the extent to which Fennell depends upon the secondary literature. For example, in discussing the expanding reach of the church’s treasury in these centuries, he relies exclusively upon Shchapov’s brilliant, if controversial, reconstruction of the history of the church statutes attributed to princes Vladimir and Iaroslav (Shchapov, 1972), and makes no effort to invoke the texts themselves (Shchapov, 1976). In discussing the expansion of paganism he depends heavily upon Rybakov’s often tendentious synthesis (Rybakov, 1987), rather than the original texts, many of which are easily available for inspection (Gal’kovskii, 1913-16). To

be sure, a survey like this must employ reliable secondary literature, but it is disorienting nevertheless to encounter this unbeguiled acceptance of secondary opinion in one who has spent much of his life unravelling the intricate history embedded in original sources.

A second issue likely to bother some readers is the Russocentric presumption behind the text. Certainly one is entitled to agree with Russians who, like the Muscovite princes, laid claim to the Kievan legacy, and joined both histories into a common ancestor of imperial Russia. But now, perhaps more than at any time since the seventeenth century, such a course demands explanation, and Fennell shows little evidence of having been aware of the issue. In describing the world of Kiev and Novgorod, he blithely characterizes it as a “Russian society” (89), a “Russian population” (90), and the subject of his study as “Russia” (30, 36, 84, 107 et al.), in this way complicating effective use of the book as a text.

Joining these complaints to the fairly narrow focus upon the high church, one must temper one’s enthusiasm for this last work from the pen of one of our century’s most renowned scholars of Rus’ and Muscovy.

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