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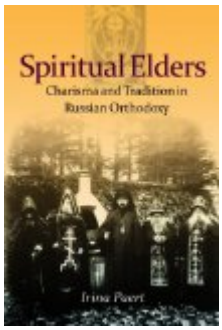
Irina Paert. *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. 308 S. $43.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-429-3.



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One of the remarkable features of post-Soviet Russia has been the energetic attempts by scholars, by the devout, and by devout scholars to rediscover, recover, portray, and explain Russia's religious past and thereby to inform, inspire, and enlighten themselves and others. Parallel to these efforts has been a healthy output further to the west of new studies of Russian Orthodoxy, dissident movements, other faiths, and religion in general. In 2003, the confluence of these streams bore excellent fruit with Irina Paert's publication of *Old Believers, Religious Dissent and Gender in Russia*, and she has done it again with the book under review. Just like her first monograph, *Spiritual Elders* would have been very difficult to produce a generation earlier. For here the author utilizes, in addition to imperial Russian sources, some Soviet-period works, and studies published in the West, no less than one hundred Russian books issued since 1990--half of them publications of primary sources--and another twenty-five Russian journal articles. She also makes indispensable use of papers found in four national repositories (Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, Russian State Historical Archive, Manuscript Division of the Russian State Library, and the St. Petersburg Filial of the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences); ten or eleven Russian provincial archives (depending on how one classifies the "Republic of Tatarstan"); and one separate monastery archive (Valaam); as well as modest use of Web publications and an interview or two (she previously did extensive oral history research on the 1920s to the 1930s).

Paert organizes her monograph into six roughly equal chapters, themselves, like the introduction, divided into six-to-eleven easily manageable and digestible sections of usually two or three pages, the chapter headings perfectly signaling the contents. Chapter 1, "Spiritual Guidance, *Pneumatikos Patir*, and Mystical Prayer: Lost and Found," takes us from the origin of Christian monasticism through Russia's late medieval acquisition of hesychasm, its decline in the 1500s, and its rediscovery and revival two centuries later by Paisii Velichkovskii in emigration at Athos

and Moldavia. Chapter 2, "Monasticism and Elders between Reform and Revival, 1721-1801," examines the marginalized, illegal, and then sometimes legal anchorite-sages, hermitage-dwellers, and monastics, including females, in the eighteenth century. Chapter 3, "The Institutionalization of Spiritual Guidance, 1810-1860: Achievements and Tensions," runs through the variety and efforts of both Paisiite elders at Optina Hermitage and elsewhere and non-Paisiite elders, like Serafim of Sarov, plus their work and conflicts with the demands of the institutionalized church, their interactions with both influenced and influential laity, and the seemingly archaic popular veneration of them.

Chapter 4, "Elders, Society, and the Russian People in Post-Emancipation Russia, 1860-1890," covers the diversity of developments and adaptations of elders' activities in this "changing world," among them the immense prestige of Amvrosii Grenkov of Optina (1812-91), elite literary depictions of elders (such as Dostoevsky's Zosima), "the popularization of mystical discourse" (p. 134) with the publication of ***The Way of the Pilgrim*** (late nineteenth century), and the massive increase of Russians at Panteleimon Monastery in Mt. Athos. Chapter 5, "Appropriating the Elders: Elders and Political Crisis in Late Imperial Russia, 1890s-1917," handles the now greater diversity of the elder phenomenon and the spread of popular religious culture with glimpses at attempts by bishops to promote and the Monastic Council of 1909 to institutionalize elders; their "ways and means of moral influence" (p. 147); parish priests and villagers, such as, respectively, John of Kronstadt and Grigorii Rasputin; the campaign to canonize Serafim of Sarov; the spectacular affair of Russia's heavy-handed treatment of Greece as a banana republic in the removal of 833 ***imiaslavtsy*** ("Name of God"--deemed to be heretical) monks from Athos; and less spectacular instances of bishops' curbing elders' independent control over rich donations. And chapter 6, "The Legacy of the Elders after the Revolution, 1917-2000," reviews the paradoxical vicissitudes of eldership under new and difficult conditions, with the inevitable flourishing and then decline in the great centers abroad, both Greek-controlled Athos and Finnish-ruled Valaam; the forced substitution of eldership for standard, ordained leadership in persecuted, underground Soviet Russian Orthodox communities and circles; and then the revival in late and post-Soviet times.

Treating this charismatic leadership as a bridge between the prelates and rank-and-file clergy, monastics and seculars, elites and plebeians, official and unofficial, erudite and barely lettered, Synodal and schismatic, and even Orthodox and heterodox, Paert knows how to paint a verbal picture, and she treats us to approximately fifty character sketches or simple stories of individuals. For the eighteenth century, we see before us several "forest elders," including Varnava, killed by robbers for the nonexistent fees allegedly collected from spiritual children, while other such illegals hide from the authorities or live on private estates. Ivan-Fedor Ushakov of Sanaksar (1760s-70s) stands up to the local bishop on behalf of peasants, and his monastery's property is the only local estate not torched during the Pugachev Uprising. The barely literate state peasant from Tver, Vasilii-Vasilisk (d. 1824), develops a new method of learning the Jesus Prayer, and his unpublished manuscript becomes the basis for the later ***Way of the Pilgrim***, probably by the ex-Old Believer and missionary to them, Arkhimandrite Mikhail Kozlov (b. 1826).

The city-born Leonid-Lev Nagolkin (1772-1841), a dynamic expander of Optina, relaxes Paisii Velichkovsky's strict ascetic principles in order to attract more Russians, leading to some doubts about the piety of such "chubby monks" (p. 84). He is also suspected of heterodox practices, banned from advising women, and ordered to counsel less and attend church services regularly. The cautious Metropolitan Filaret Drozdov of Moscow (1782-1867) redacts the Life of Serafim

of Sarov into measured pedagogical and psychogogical tools, only to have Nicholas I's daughter Mariia promote a prophetic and miracle-filled version of Serafim's biography. The theorizing "recluse of Vysha," Bishop Feofan Govorov (1805-94), translates ***Materikon*** (Lives of female saints), but criticizes the externalized Jesus Prayer of the ***Way of the Pilgrim***. The "national elder," as Paert terms the formerly married parish priest and partial inspiration for Dostoyevsky's Zosima, Amvrosii of Optina, is steeped in folk wisdom. He devises a popular, unauthorized ***Bogoroditsa***-Multiplier-of-the-Crops icon, which the authorities suppress after the 1891 famine.

Don Cossack noblewoman Anna-Arseniia Sebriakova (b. 1833) learns to fight passions and mortify self-will from the semi-educated priest's daughter-nun Ardalonia. Arseniia become an abbess, organizes a ***Dobrotoliubie***-reading circle, counsels laypeople, but consciously limits her "spiritual family." Arkhimandrite Leonid-Serafim Chichagov (1856-1937), a hero of the 1877-78 Turkish War, creates the eight-hundred-page ***Chronicles of Serafimo-Diveevo Convent (1896)*** to get the founder, Serafim of Sarov, canonized in 1903, but censors suppress the account of the latter's alleged appointment of twelve sisters to parallel the Virgin's alleged twelve female disciples. Earlier a Diveevo abbess had protected the formerly husband-abused, violent, cat-killing and prophetic, quasi-***iurodivaia*** "Mad" ***Pelagiia***.

Within the post-Soviet Church Abroad, Nicholas Berdiaev's friend Mother Mariia Skobtsova, later fatally imprisoned in a German concentration camp for trying to protect French Jews, breaks with eldership traditions and insists on active charity, while the poet-bishop, Ioann Shakhovskoi, of San Francisco urges all parish priests to be like elders and bishops like abbots. Finally, back in Russia, under Mikhail Gorbachev and beyond, Hieromonk Ioann Krest'iankin (1910-2006) creates a sober guide for father-confessors, while the more emotional poet and comic, Father Nikolai Gur'ianov (1909-2004), becomes subject of miracle tales. This is the tip of a surface, which Paert herself barely has the space to scratch out for us in her allotted pages.

Lived religion is a terribly difficult subject to penetrate and depict, because at heart all experiences are individual and humans are so different from one another. If for earlier Russian Orthodoxy, we have limited sources and must squeeze them dry, for the modern period, where we have so many more sources for individual experiences and devotional literature, and we have a variety of ways to read and understand people's voices, Paert's approach is ideal. She treats the reader to some aspects of the lives, teachings, and reception of these elders, a great deal of historical and conceptual contextualization, and also samples of participant and scholarly opinions, while she rigorously indicates her manuscript or published sources for the benefit of the curious who wish to know more or scrutinize for themselves.

Paert hones in on certain key issues for her topic, such as the popularization of the Jesus Prayer with its expectations of mystical achievements and then the caution rooted in experience and in the hesychastic classics, here as articulated by Bishop Ignatii Brianchaninov (1806-67), against precipitous delving into this mode of spirituality, especially if divorced from partaking in church services and the fight against pernicious urges and passions. She wisely treats as open several questions of Western influence on modern Orthodox eldership, for example, cautioning against overdoing the Protestant background of the last emperor's elder-promoting sister-in-law, Grand Duchess Elizabeth. And she flatly rejects Sergii Bulgakov's contention that the "legalism of the ***Philokalia***" (i.e., ***Dobrotoliubie***) dampened spiritual creativity (p. 205).

In one of Paert's overall summations, where she allows a little of her own values to shine forth, she is somewhat pessimistic: "in the post-Emancipation period the official church tended to hijack

the popularity of elders for its own credit.... In their eagerness to provide an official framework for eldership in cenobitic monasticism, the church authorities obliterated the elements of freedom, charisma, and mysticism that were characteristic of elders. If elders embodied the most buoyant spiritual segment of the Russian Orthodox Church in this period, their impact on the Church as a whole was ultimately limited" (p. 139).

For the H-Russia reader open to discourse, I am happy to report that ***Spiritual Elders*** has opened up a set of conversations on the matters in my mind, not least of all for my own period of expertise, the era of Nil Sorskii (fl. 1470s-1508). Paert has prompted me to reconsider his and Iosif Volotskii's writings through the prism of eldership, which now will be the subject of one of my next articles. Indeed, references to Nil and Iosif, as spokesmen for major monastic tendencies whose elements get reshuffled in the era from Velichkovskii to the 1909 council, spice this volume. I could add to her allusions that Iosif's prescribed mode of daily confession combined the priestly sacramental and elders' "disclosure of thoughts" (pp. 89-90). Diveevo's alleged twelve special sisters to match the Theotokos's alleged twelve disciples is reminiscent of his similar, dozen-disciple justification for his explicitly specified twelve council brothers. The Optina elders' refusal to partake in the condemnation is reminiscent of post-Nil, Trans-Volgan opposition to condemnation of the Novgorod Heretics (so-called Judaizers) and Artemii of Pskov's refusal to condemn Matvei Bashkin in the early 1550s.

As for opening a conversation for the modern period, one of my own big questions is whether we can ascertain even approximately how many people seriously attempted hesychastic prayer; what this actually meant to them; and how many succeeded in a non-delusional, thoroughly Orthodox fashion, as the master texts claim was the ultimate goal. For a sixteenth-century comparison, I can only venture that maybe one-third to one-half of the Iosifov monks might have read one or more of the available hesychastic guide texts (John Climacus, et. al.), but what they did with these words is anyone's educated guess. According to Nil, we should remember, the initial justification for such prayer is that it helps to ward off the evil urge-thought-passions (***pomysly*** = logismoi), not the possible attainment of mystical ecstasy.

I would be rash to speak in this vein for specialists in modern aspects of Russian eldership, such as epistolary advising or pilgrims seeking the ideal confessor, which constitute Paert's subject matter. But I would be surprised if some of these scholars will not also revisit their thinking as a result of this well-researched, well-organized, well-written, and delightful-to-read book.

Thank you, Irina Paert. Thank you, NIUP!

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