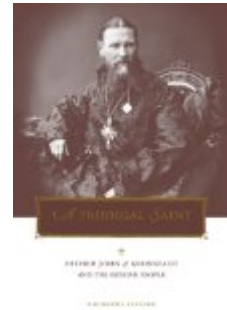


Nadieszda Kizenko. *A Prodigal Saint: Father John of Kronstadt and the Russian People*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000. xiii + 384 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-01976-5.

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## Modern Holiness in the Grips of Unholy Modernity

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It is sometimes nice to imagine what it might be like to be an object of public adoration: your image is mass-produced on mugs, postcards, and key rings; you dread leaving your home without a small army of bouncers to shield you from your delirious admirers, some of whom have travelled great distances in order to see you, to kiss you, to tear bits of your clothes—some even bite you—so they can have a piece of you as a trophy; the national press reports the smallest detail of your life as news, sometimes relying on dubious sources; foreign press correspondents spread your fame to faraway places; publishers compete for the privilege of releasing your literary efforts; the intellectual elite obsessively discusses the roots and effects of your celebrity while the highest ranks of society invite you into their homes; the head of state himself invites you to share a most private family moment with him. If you thought that such mass hysteria was ushered in with the Beatles, MTV, or *Entertainment Tonight*, think again. Such was the life of a Christian Orthodox saint, Ioann Kronshtadtskii (1829-1908).

Nadieszda Kizenko, Associate Professor of History at SUNY-Albany, has written an excellent biography of this compelling historical figure, known in English as Father John of Kronstadt. Kizenko goes far beyond a simple narrative of his life, a static description of his character traits and schematic overview of his ideas, well worn material already covered by hagiographers and by bi-

ographers, both friendly and hostile, of the most celebrated Russian saint of the twentieth century. Although *A Prodigal Saint: Father John of Kronstadt and the Russian People* does not neglect the saintly priest's background, beliefs, innovations, and inner struggles, it also examines the degree to which the different versions of his life corresponded to changing social and political conditions. Kizenko unveils a multidimensional portrait of Father John which allows her to delve into the role of the Orthodox Church in Late Imperial Russia, popular piety and lived religion, the importance of gender in religiosity, the interrelation between saints and their cults, and the involvement of religious figures in politics. The author endeavors to explore what is specific to modern sanctity in general. Along the way, she uncovers modern trends in religiosity that go beyond Russia, such as the increasing importance of priests, as opposed to monks or bishops, in defining piety and the dialectical relation between modern sanctity on the one hand, and the media, publicity, and politics on the other.

The first chapter traces the life of Father John (born Ioann Sergiev) from his humble beginnings as the son of a barely literate sacristan from Arkhangel'sk province to his scholarship-funded studies at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy and through his first fundamental and consequential career decisions. Following a typical clerical pattern, Ioann "inherited" his post by marrying the daughter of an archpriest at St. Andrew's Cathedral on Kronstadt, the small garrison island guarding the way to the capital of the Romanov empire in the Gulf of

Finland. Breaking radically with tradition, and without much regard for his wife's opinion, he opts for a "spiritual (i.e. celibate) marriage." His diaries reveal to Kizenko a fundamentally religious nature that attributed a symbolic significance and moral value to every event, no matter how commonplace. His models are drawn primarily from the ascetic Church Fathers. Despite his deeply pessimistic perception of human nature, he does not retire from the secular world, as monks do, and he suffers the consequences of this decision, not the least of which are constant reminders of his social inferiority amidst the glitter and power of the imperial capital. Breaking with the common tradition of the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches, he does not see women as more prone to sin than men and his relative gender equality makes him particularly popular with women.

Chapter Two investigates the liturgical innovations that first made Father John a celebrity, at least within in his parish, from the 1850s through the 1870s. He fashioned a more emotionally direct and lively liturgy that included inspirational choral singing and sermons on burning social issues (Father John did not shirk from bemoaning poverty and castigating the rich). By re-establishing the Eucharist as the center of parish life and introducing unprecedented mass confessions, Father John made the most important individual contribution to a new piety grounded in the sacraments.

Without ever lapsing into hagiography, Kizenko offers in Chapter Three a rare glimpse into what might be called an "objective" core of saintliness, before historical circumstances and exigencies construct idealized hagiographic figures, as happened after Father John's death. Though burdened with the same human flaws and passions as the next person, Father John waged a sincere, persistent, methodical, and ultimately successful battle against his modest appetite, his sensual desires, his pride, his miserliness, and his disinterest in human company. Having attained the virtues antithetical to these flaws, Father John united in his person two models of clerical service normally thought to be distinct: the power of prayer and spiritual guidance offered to the laity by ascetics, and the practical advice and material assistance for everyday-life problems that the most active of parish clergy committed to their flocks. Intuited by the poverty of his childhood, legitimated by patristic readings, and inspired by the impoverished countryside and the destitute worker neighborhoods of an industrializing, urbanized Russia, Father John's stern calls for social justice parallel those of his radical socialist contemporaries, such as Dobroliubov and Chernyshevsky. Like them, he

saw the solution in the re-structuring of society. Unlike radicals, Father John saw Christianity's—not socialist theories—as the basis of this restructuring. Like them, he also endorsed work as an additional escape from poverty. Unlike most of them, he applied his ideas in founding the House of Industry as a shelter/trade-learning school/workshop for the poor. He complemented his beliefs with his boundless personal charity.

All this brought Father John the broad recognition and respect of his fellow Russians, whose thousands of letters to him Kizenko painstakingly classifies and analyzes in chapter Four. Strict dichotomies between high and low culture, between elite and popular piety, collapse under this inspection. Barely literate peasants, politically astute workers, clerical colleagues, and leading aristocrats all addressed petitions to the saintly priest, requesting that Father John pray for their healing, render emergency financial assistance, or intercede on their behalf before the authorities for special favors. Counter to exaggerated views of the strict division of post-Petrine society into two cultures, Kizenko exposes a commonality in the supplicants' understandings of Orthodoxy. In contrast to the scholarly stereotype of the Russian masses as totally ignorant of church doctrine, the author brilliantly demonstrates a less fractured continuum of social morality in which even humble supplicants understood and accepted personal responsibility for the "rules" through which the Divine grace could grant them healing or other help. Moreover, the majority of petitioners exemplify a view of society as a moral universe and of themselves as active players in the economy of salvation that is surprisingly congruent with Orthodox theology.

In chapters five through seven, Kizenko explores the distinct uses that competing groups made of Father John's unofficial but widely accepted sanctity. Conservative publicists held him up as an ideal of Orthodox clerical leadership in lieu of an intellectually modish bureaucratic hierarchy. The "Ioannites," lay religious rigorists who rejected modernity and broke with hierarchical discipline to pose as the only "true Orthodox" and to pursue their own Protestant-like communities, venerated him as a saint or even as Christ. The writer Nikolai Leskov attacked Father John for his rejection of Tolstoyan opposition to official Orthodoxy. Radical publicists contributed what became the longest lasting image of Father John as a reactionary obscurantist. From 1881 through his death, they vilified Father John who, shocked by the violence, atheism, and anticlericalism of the revolutionary movement, began identifying Russian Orthodoxy with the autocracy and endorsed the extreme Right

as the most steadfast opponents of revolution.

After 1904-1905, those disillusioned by Russia's increasing secularization and political reforms used the saintly priest's prestige to promote their anti-modernist agendas. Most interesting is the Orthodox hierarchy's attitude toward Father John: despite initial suspicions over his liturgical innovations, Father John's undiminished loyalty to the Church, the theological rectitude of his innovations, and his centuries-long clerical background made them trust him and use him for their own purpose. The majority of the Russian episcopate was perspicacious enough to realize that John of Kronstadt was the Church's ideal answer to the perceived erosion of religiosity and the Church's position in society produced by economic upheaval, urbanization, new social theories, and political reforms.

The politically turbulent first decade of the century, the last of Ioann Sergiev's life, demonstrated that celebrities, saintly or not, often do not enjoy the simple right of neutrality in political struggles. Father John's posthumous treatment by hagiographers, biographers, and Soviet atheist writers, the subject of the last chapter, shows that even saints cannot escape the distortions that historical circumstances impose, especially those of the extreme political polarization which divided Russians from the latter quarter of the nineteenth century until the Yeltsin years. For example, the importance of Father John's popularity with women was consistently overlooked or presented as proof of his obscurantism, i.e., he could only appeal to the more sentimental and less educated sex. His political activity was played up both by the emigrant monarchist flock of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which canonized him in 1964, and by the Soviet regime, which made the term "Ioannite" a byword for the counterrevolutionary activity of religious fanatics. When the Moscow Patriarchate finally canonized him in 1990, Father John was used once again, this time as weapon in inter-Church rivalries. The hierarchy of the Patriarchate overlooked his politics altogether and emphasized his Russian-ness in a bid to establish its territorial connection to the saint and therefore its superiority over the emigration Church.

*A Prodigal Saint* is an example of how to write a highly scholarly monograph that can still engage the average reader. Kizenko ably employs a highly "interactive" style: at every turn she anticipates the reader's new questions, articulates them clearly, shows why they are legitimate, and discusses various explanations. Where her sources are silent, she lays out all the possi-

ble or already proposed answers and comes down with a final judgment based on educated speculation, as she does about Father John's motivations to remain a virgin and his wife's feelings about this (pp. 32-35). Kizenko also uses her deep familiarity with social conditions in the era to explain contradictory information in different sources, as, for instance, in the discrepancy of opinions about the living conditions in Ioannite shelters (p. 222). The author foresees possible objections in her convincingly argued conclusions. For example, when she points out the variety of ways in which Father John's petitioners expressed the belief that their illnesses were linked to sin to argue against the objection that petitioners might have written that to win his sympathy (p. 103).

Most refreshing is Kizenko's ability to offer insights into Orthodox devotional piety that do justice to the lived experience as opposed to being based on broad deductions or sociological theory. The author owes this to her profound familiarity with the history of the Christian Church in general, Orthodox liturgical traditions, and the modern social history of Russia. For instance, most foreign travelers and observers, as well as subsequent historians, who wrote about the clergy in tsarist Russia attributed the low esteem accorded priests to their low education or drunkenness. This view, however, does not explain why, after two centuries of seminary education had produced highly qualified priests, many of whom were involved in various intellectual endeavors, from history to archaeology and ethnography, the image of the estate had scarcely improved and not a single priest had been canonized by the end of imperial Russia. Kizenko, in contrast, argues that the traditionally high valuation of virginity, which placed recluses, wanderers, and monks closer to heaven, is a more compelling explanation for the relatively low opinion of the parish clergy. Similarly, the infrequency of receiving communion in Russia had been traditionally seen—especially by foreign travelers of non-Orthodox faith—as proof of the superficial hold of Christianity among a nation that remained pagan at heart, or as a result of growing secularization towards the end of the empire. Kizenko explains that many of the faithful were dissuaded from partaking in the sacrament by Orthodox injunctions against receiving communion "unworthily." Relics, holy water, blessed bread, holy oil, and crosses were more accessible to the populace.

The book is the first major contribution coming out of a recent wave of research into society, Church and clergy in late imperial Russia. Kizenko also integrates brilliantly the insights offered by other studies of junior scholars—many still unpublished.[1] The author's conclusions are

ambitious yet clearly articulated. At the European level, she compares John of Kronstadt to similar phenomena of popular sanctity in twentieth-century France (Jean Marie Vianney) and Italy (Padre Pio). The broadest of all is that towards the end of the nineteenth century, both the Russian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches began “to accept emotional, personal, and supernatural forms of piety that they discouraged in the eighteenth century” (p. 285). Both embraced popular piety in the face of the challenges of modernity that threatened established Churches. In the case of Russia, one man, according to Kizenko, proved singularly important for affecting this change. John of Kronstadt brought official Orthodoxy closer to the devout by addressing their everyday material and emotional needs. At the same time, he brought the people closer to official Orthodoxy by attracting them to a more sacrament-centered piety. The Church paid a price, however, for this concession to modernity, for it lost its monopoly on sanctity’s prestige. In the age of mass production and improved transportation, sanctity became, and has remained, a commodity in the hands of all those seeking to profit from it, from hawkers of trinkets to political parties, municipal authorities, and state institutions.

One finds it hard to disagree with Kizenko’s judicious conclusions. Still under the menace of secularization, the Church has taken further steps toward meeting popular feeling. John Paul II has canonized as martyrs an impressive number of victims of political persecution in former socialist countries, while, after 1982, the Vatican requires only one miracle in lieu of three for canonization. Combining the ascetic ideal of the startsy with the social activism of the post-Great Reforms generation of parish priests, John of Kronstadt indeed became a modern clerical super-hybrid of irresistible appeal. This and other traits make him exceptionally pertinent to our day. His sponsoring of socially engaged female monasticism endears him to modern sensibilities of gender-equality. His support of recovering alcoholics and their families strikes a chord in many a home in a post-Soviet society devastated by drinking. Time, and the consciousness of official Church and faithful, have also answered the nagging question about the one un-modern trait of the saint which preoccupied his liberal minded contemporaries: “what is one to do, if a man of God, a man of undisputed holiness, expresses political views one found disturbing or even repugnant” (p. 257)? One simply ignores them.

This reviewer wonders whether some of Kizenko’s conclusions could not be more broadly applied. She writes that Father John “had more in common with rad-

ical socialist thinkers as Dobroliubov and Chensyshevsky than with most contemporary Orthodox clerics” in that he believed that “the priest must be militant in seeking to change the world around him” (p. 90). New research by Jennifer Hedda—as well as by this reviewer—indicates that, while the author’s assessment is in a sense correct, there were far more socially engaged clergymen with a militant activism for change than historiography has acknowledged so far. Kizenko and junior scholars in the field have also brought out the late imperial clergy’s antipathy for the atheist and anticlerical educated classes. Also, growing numbers of clerical activists in the late Empire, whether involved in liberal or radical-Rightist politics, shared Father John’s belief that the clergy should guide the people politically, especially since the majority of people were well-intentioned but could be led “astray” (p. 245). Father John’s “vision of total Orthodox culture and a totally Orthodox society” was also dear to the hearts of most clergymen (p. 83).

All this indicates that Orthodox clergy in the late empire were not simply involved in partisan politics out of individual motives, but that they may have also been making a bid—as a *soslovie*—for the moral-social leadership of future Russia, offering themselves as an alternative to a secular intelligentsia with dubious national credentials that did not really understand the people (*narod*). Certainly, letters sent by workers and peasants to Father John admitting that “there is nothing left to do except to seek help from our clergy” (p. 247) could lead Orthodox priests to believe that their ambitions might not be so far-fetched. That thousands of rural and urban parishioners asked their priests what party to vote for in the Duma elections, and that so many clergymen were elected to all four Dumas seems to suggest that the Orthodox clergy were a much more politicized and politically popular element in the late empire than previously recognized. That Father John’s backing of the radical Right eclipsed all other aspects of his life, including his bold advocacy of social justice, also seems to parallel rather than contradict the fate of many fellow priests, whose liberal or populist political involvement was obscured by the Rightist membership—often superficial—of other clergymen.

Another of Kizenko’s conclusions that is more broadly applicable is her insight that “the cleavage lines that split public opinion on the Ioannites” or on Father John’s particular popularity with women “did not correspond to the classical lines of early twentieth-century political conflicts” (p. 198). Indeed, one could be at the same time a member of the Union of Russian People and a castigator of the rich, like John of Kronstadt, or a monar-

chist and a caustic critic of anti-Semitic pogroms, like Archbishop Antonii (Khrapovitskii), or a Rightist Duma deputy and a pro-peasant advocate like bishop Evlogii, or a radical socialist publicist and a misogynist and anti-Semite like some of the critics of Father John.

Kizenko manages to intertwine biography, sociopolitical analysis, theological discussion and Church history to produce a clear and captivating book on a subject that has suffered from a dearth of academic attention. The only broad criticism one might make of this fine work is orthographic. Although Kizenko makes an earnest effort to interject explanation of technical or Russian terms, readers unfamiliar with Church history, Russian Orthodoxy or the Russian language might have found a glossary useful for terms such as *kasha*, *hieromonk*, *hiero-schemamonk*, Saint >Feodosii, cenobitic, Kapitolina, *omophorions*, *kolbuks*, chiliastic and *panikhida*. This reviewer has already used this superb monograph in an upper-division colloquium and the students responded to it very well.

#### Note

[1]. See Laurie Manchester, "Secular Ascetics: The Mentality of Orthodox Clergymen's Sons in Late Imperial Russia," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1995; and

"The Secularization of the Search for Salvation: The Self-Fashioning of Orthodox Clergymen's Sons in Late Imperial Russia," *Slavic Review* 57, no.1 (spring 1998):50-76; Vera Shevzov, "Popular Orthodoxy in Late Imperial Rural Russia," Ph.D. diss, Yale University, 1994; Page Herlinger, "The Religious Identity of Workers and Peasant Migrants in St. Petersburg, 1880-1917," Ph.D. Dissertation, UC Berkeley, 1996; Jennifer E. Hedda, "Good Shepherds: The St. Petersburg Pastorate and the Emergence of Social Activism in the Russian Orthodox Church, 1855-1917," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1998; Robert P. Geraci, *Window on the East. National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2001; A.K.Pisiotis, "Orthodoxy Versus Autocracy: The Orthodox Church and Clerical Political Dissent in Late Imperial Russia, 1905-1914," Ph.D. diss., Georgetown U., 2000. Scott Kentworthy and George Kosar at Brandeis U. are currently finishing dissertations on "Monastic Revival in Modern Russia: The Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery, 1764-1920" and "Russian Orthodoxy in Crisis and Revolution: The Church Council of 1917-18" respectively. Mark McCarthy (U. of Notre Dame) is currently researching the British lay missionary's Lord Granville Radstock III's effects on official and popular Orthodox piety from 1874-1884.

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