

On Russian Orthodox Judeologies:  
A Review Essay Discussing Dominic  
Rubin, *Holy Russia, Sacred Israel:  
Jewish-Christian Encounters in Russian  
Religious Thought* (Brighton, MA:  
Academic Studies Press, 2010), 558 pp.

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Dominic Rubin's present magisterial study of Russian Orthodox intellectual engagements with Judaism written from a Jewish point of view offers a rare and truly welcome invitation to inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Jews. Given a background of competing messianisms, but with Israel's holding sure primacy owing to divine revelation, the fact that the "Russian idea," as first articulated by the monk Philotheus in his theoretical construct regarding the "Third Rome," is so imbued with an expansionist visionary outlook does much, on the one hand, to explain why Russians have viewed themselves as a "Chosen People" with justifiable imperial pretensions, but which, on the other, can only be checkmated by the Chosen People themselves, Israel.

Ironically, it was Russian expansionism that saw the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth gradually annexed that, in turn, gave rise to Imperial Russia's significant Jewish population, the presence of which could only lead to inevitable clashes between "chosen peoples." Indeed, it was the evident Russian fear and mistrust of the Jews that augured the enactment of the ignominious Pale of Settlement (*Cherta osedlosti*) by the decree of Catherine the Great in 1791, which

for the most part restricted Jewish residency in the empire to the present-day countries of Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, and Ukraine. Tragically, this “arrangement” by imperial edict virtually ensured the impoverishment in shtetls of the vast majority of Jews along with their societal estrangement that could not but facilitate the shameful pogroms against them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Given this “domestic” situation, it is not surprising that devout Orthodox minds, given Christian conviction, could not stand on the sidelines oblivious to the prevalent Christian prejudice against the Jews. The voice of true Orthodoxy needed to be heard above the rabblement of the masses. For this, Rubin turns to past great minds of Russian Orthodoxy who have directly addressed Russia’s “Jewish Question,” effectively rendering it a “Christian” one. In particular, he at length expounds upon the contributions of Soloviev (Solovyov/Solov’ëv),<sup>1</sup> Bulgakov, Berdyaev, Florensky, Karsavin, and Frank, each one enjoying virtually monographic treatments. In their context, the following notable Jewish voices are heard, namely, Gershenzon, Shestov, and Steinberg – and, in his own way, Frank.

A couple of important ecclesiastical figures, on the other hand, are given prominence, even if only in passing, as it were, by Rubin for their outspokenness on the subject of Jewry. These are the Metropolitans Philaret (Drozdov) of Moscow (1782–1867) and Antonii (Khrapovitsky) of Kiev (1863–1936). As to the former, he references (p.18) one of his Good Friday sermons in which he explicitly preaches that the Jews as a people do not hold the responsibility for crucifying Christ. Metropolitan Philaret’s “philo-Semitism,” however is immediately attenuated by Rubin with his claim that he only acted with the hope that the Jews of the Empire would actually soon embrace Christianity. As to the latter, the author is more

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<sup>1</sup> As a point of methodological critique, Rubin does not observe consistency in his transliterations. He does not adhere to current American/English academic norms, even if one can justifiably avail oneself of universally popular renderings (e.g., Dostoevsky over Dostoevskii or Solovyov – and not the more French Soloviev over the academic Solov’ëv).

glowing in his assessment, noting how this churchman was “active in intervening to stop pogroms and in preaching against anti-Semitism,” after having already stated that he encouraged Jews “to remain faithful to their religion instead of joining the ranks of the revolutionaries, adding that Russian Christians can only be friends to such Jews, while they must be hostile to their faithless co-religionists” (p.140, n.184). It is on this note that one finds the needed word of moderation for coming to terms with the historiographical dilemma of depicting the “Jew-capitalist” versus the “Jew-revolutionary Bolshevik,” as should become clear in the remarks that will be following. From a religious point of view, the contrast between the religious versus secular Jew is more decisive.

As Rubin makes clear, Philaret’s philo-Semitism finds its best theoretician in the writings of Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), the embodiment of the Russian God-seeker, whose intellectual life matured at the time of the first grisly pogroms (the 1880s). And, as in the case of Philaret, Rubin’s overall positive assessment of Soloviev seems, at times to be proffered almost reluctantly unlike the case of one of the Jewish voices he often cites, Hamutal Bar-Yosef, whose own essay he relies on, namely, “The Jewish Reception of Vladimir Solov’ev,” which I find more incisive and unstinted in its praise of Soloviev for being a true “righteous non-Jew.”<sup>2</sup> Rubin begins his exposition of Soloviev noting that he will primarily comment on Soloviev’s essays “The Jews and the Christian Question” (1884) and “The Talmud and the Recent Polemical Literature about it in Austria and Germany” (1886 rather than, as Rubin mistakenly dates it, 1885). But he actually – and laudably – extensively comments on others too, like “The New Testament Israel” (1885) and “A Short Story of the Anti-Christ,” which concludes his work “Three Conversations” (1899).

Throughout his study, Rubin is to be commended for his extensive citation of the figures he treats. Methodologically, however, he is to be sternly criticized for not providing exact pagination for his quotes, something frustrating for any would-be reader who wants to check out the Russian original without

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<sup>2</sup> This essay is contained in the collection *Vladimir Solov’ev: Reconciler and Polemicist*, ed. Wil van den Bercken et al. (Leuven: Peters, 2000), 363–92.