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Christian Socialist Views among Orthodox Parish Clergy in the Twilight of the Romanovs[1]

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Abstract
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In groundbreaking historical research and socio-religious analysis, the author utilizes mostly unpublished and previously unused sources from the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in order to show that *pace* the Russian clergy's traditional image as apologists of tsarism and turgid functionaries of the state, from 1905 on many Orthodox clerics joined lay society in a revolution that shook the Romanov monarchy. Among the hundreds of clerics from all over the empire who took part in open debate and protests demanding the radical reform of absolutist government, the author concentrates on the examples of Vasilii Popov, Vladimir Lakhin, Iona Brikhnichev, Pavel Sokolov, and the "Khar'kov Five," Pavel Grigorovich, Vladimir Kuplenskii, Vladimir Shapovalov, Ioann Filenskii and Nikolai Voznesenskii. These and other clerics often supported the same demands as other social groups, e.g., the freedoms of press, conscience, speech, association, and assembly as well as the abolition of capital punishment, the inviolability of residence and person, and wider land distribution. Clergymen were also incriminated in inciting peasants to violent acts against landowners and destruction of private property, or instigating riots and attacks on the police. Influenced by moral theology and diffuse socialist tenets, Russian clerics developed a distinct blend of Christian

[1] I wish to dedicate this article to my wife Ulrike, who patiently and judiciously edited for cogency much of the research on which it was based.

socialist ideas (and idealism), with strong populist and clericalist undertones.

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What do I care for your laws now? What are your customs to me?
Your morals, your life, your State, your Faith?
Let your judges judge me.
Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Gentle Creature[2]

Introduction

By the first years of the twenty-first century, a revolution that started in Tehran in 1979 had within two decades spread political Islam across the Middle East and south Asia and shown religion to be as formidable a stimulus of political militancy as the most radical of the modern era's secular ideologies of social liberation. For its part, Christianity had also motivated radical political action at distinct times. In the core of such action lay the egalitarianism of Christian divine and natural law, derived from the purely religious equality taught by Jesus Himself.[3] This spirit of egalitarianism had been kept alive in East and West by patristic tradition and by the theory and practices of monasticism. It re-emerged at times of social distress to legitimate the European peasantry's democratic inclinations and numerous uprisings.[4] After the Reformation, the militant asceticism of Protestant sects fed political upheavals that overturned ancient kingship, such as the English monarchy.[5]

In late imperial Russia, too, progressively-minded Orthodox clergymen blended Christian belief and morality with the

[2] *The Best Short Stories of Dostoevsky*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: The Modern Library, 1979), 294.

[3] See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), I: 369.

[4] See Ibid., I:370–75.

[5] See, for instance, Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (New York: Atheneum, 1968).

gospel of social equality propagated by socialist ideologues of their time. By the turn of the twentieth century, the rise of liberal constitutionalism among Russian lay "society" had also overflowed into the mentality of a younger generation of better educated and civic-minded priests. Most of all, however, the political mind of dissident clergymen betrayed influences of traditional Russian pro-agrarian populism (*narodnichestvo*) as well as anxious aspirations of clerico-professional and social advancement. The two tendencies combined to create a spontaneous, specifically Russian, populist clericalism or clerical populism, often with socialist undertones, which, at least in the case of rural clergymen, was only diffusely informed by the tenets of Western Christian socialism.

After a brief review of some of those tenets of Western Christian socialism, we will turn to an examination of the context and causes of Russian socialist attitudes and agitation among Orthodox clergy at the end of the Romanov and imperial eras. We review differences among rural and urban clergy and then concentrate on the particular examples of Vasilii Popov, Vladimir Lakhin, Iona Brikhnichev, Pavel Sokolov, and the "Khar'kov Five," Pavel Grigorovich, Vladimir Kuplenskii, Vladimir Shapovalov, Ioann Filenskii and Nikolai Voznesenskii. Each of these is illustrative of the fact that Orthodox clerics were not – contrary to how they are too often portrayed – apologists of tsarism and turgid functionaries of the state. Rather, from 1905 onward, many Orthodox clerics joined lay society in a revolution that shook the Romanov monarchy deeply.

1) The Early Proponents of Christian Socialism

Christian socialism arose gradually in the nineteenth century as a response to the mechanization of human productivity and the destitution of the industrial proletariat, the triumph of utilitarian ethic in the organization of economic and political life, and the swelling of the state's bureaucratic and military power. Romantic thinkers such as Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) prepared the way for Christian socialism by uncovering the inability of industrial society to provide