

BOOK REVIEW



Alain Besançon, *Sfânta Rusie*, translated by Vlad Russo,
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Published in 2012 in France, Alain Besançon's study, "Holy Russia", proposes to offer the Occidental reader a balanced and neutral introduction to the troubled history of the former Empire. Especially in the context of recent events in Ukraine, the book is welcomed, and should offer a minimal access way to a world seen mainly through a propaganda perspective. As the author confesses at the end of his essay, Besançon is annoyed with the French "illusions", "naivety" and "ignorance" related to Russia. This is why the writer has tried to show a succinct and accessible story, designed to overcome Russophile and Russophobe temptations. However, at the end of the book, there remains a large question mark related to the extent of his success in this matter, because "Holy Russia" breathes enough idiosyncrasy in order to fail the elementary test of a "sine ira et studio" history. Mainly, the author sins through a fundamental error: the clear misunderstanding of the Orthodox dimension, which triggers a chain of additional problems. I will try to offer concrete examples to illustrate my opinion in what follows.

Even from the beginning of the essay, Besançon correctly notices that the history of Russia cannot be understood without a

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reference to Eastern spirituality: “the Orthodoxy is a bond for the Russian people (p. 34)”. But the interpretation given by the French historian to Orthodoxy unfortunately remains much too tributary to Western concepts, thus being rich in distortions and misunderstandings.

Thus, according to Besançon, “belief (the Christian belief - n.n.) has not suffered deviations in any of the two religions, but it has been practised differently by each”, but the first part is not supported by any proof. As a matter of fact, the author tries as much as possible to harmonise the differences between beliefs and to emphasise their common parts. This is why, for instance, Besançon reminds us that Western theologians are willing to admit nowadays that “Filioque” “can receive an acceptable meaning for all of us and that its absolute value may be reduced from the status of a doctrine to the one of simple theological opinion according to the belief”. Even if things are as such, what I think relevant in this part is the much too quick availability of Catholics to overlook any weakness (except for Papal infallibility) not only related to the Orthodox people, and less Besançon's speculative statement that “the entire orientation of the Orthodox mysticism lies in the statement that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father”. As a matter of fact, Orthodox mysticism does not revolve especially around this statement.

The “legalism” cast upon the West especially by Russians is explained by Besançon through the rationalisations key, bypassing in this way the theological roots of the trend, already present in full with Anselm of Canterbury or the Papal Revolution of Gregory VII. “It is true that the Russian authors, living in a country with a poor legal tradition, have not always been willing to comply with the law.” However, the Russians' problem is not compliance with the law, but the transformation of God of love in a God accountant, who judges peoples' deeds based on an impersonal mathematical scale, with all the consequences deriving from this. Besançon does not overcome these cultivated prejudices even when talking about the folk religion. Reminding us again about the delicate controversy

over “Filioque”, the French historian notes, with a vaguely dissimulated satisfaction, the ignorance of Russian masses regarding this matter. The observation is most likely correct, but the issue is to what extent the people from Russia or abroad have been aware of a matter implying certain theological abilities.

Besançon's doubting opinion is felt when he talks about the “very long” Mass, then quotes a “benevolent” Catholic theologian. “The Mass atmosphere (...) is, too often maybe, misleading and leads to the confusion between the religious feeling—even profound and honest—and the essence of life lived in grace, the graciousness that surrounds the entire will”. From this point of view, it is interesting how the same description would have looked like through the eyes of a less benevolent theologian.

It is clear that the author does not have an uncommon sympathy for the Orthodox Russian, seen as a prisoner of “psychedelic splendours” and lacking “an education based on concepts related to his religion”. However, when Besançon tells us that the Eastern vision implies that “when exiting the church, it is advisable to force yourself to do good deeds, but the most important thing is to preserve the live feeling that you are a sinner, even to keep on committing sins (n.n), to strengthen your conviction”, he switches from misunderstanding to heretical deviation. Moreover, not clearly interpreting a passage, according to our historian, the Russian is fundamentally a religious histrionic: “He (the Russian - n.n.) intensely lives the present moment, dives into his role, and is moved. He believes that he is truly the character played.” These small bites do not refer only to the description of the villeins. When talking, for instance, about the education acquired in the Western universities by the rich classes, Besançon cannot refrain to quote Koyre, because young Russians studying in Germany have not read the books of Schelling, Hegel, or Schleiermacher, being satisfied only to consult the timetable.

All these false notes and inconsistencies are not random and come from the misunderstanding of Eastern philosophy. For Besançon, like for any other Westerner, there is a clear separation

between created and uncreated: “The Latins are amazed with the focus on the mysticism, up to the absorbency or the polarisation of the entire life, not only the Christian one, but also of the human life in general.” Nevertheless, the accused attitude derives naturally from the philosophy of God's uncreated energies, which fill the creation. If the world feeds from the spread of divine grace, then it is impossible to draw arbitrary limits between the “human life in general” and the “Christian life”, as Westerners would like. Thus, the Russian's attitude with his endless genuflections and icon prostration is a natural consequence of a high theology, processed by the people with the priests' help.

As a matter of fact, this visible focus on Europe is not limited only to the theological issues. Besançon renders value to the Russian literature only through the ability to achieve Western standards. “This Russian nobility is now able to create an entirely European literature, filled with French, English and German influences.” Or: “Literature and music, although original, were entirely European and rightfully entered the universal heritage.” The Russian ballet has been born from the “fertile seed planted by the French choreography school”, the Kremlin and its churches “have been elevated by Italian masters”, and Kandinsky and Malevich avant-gardism has raised the interest of the French art because “it initiated the entire movement”.

In “Holy Russia”, a secondary issue in terms of amplitude, but not less important, is the presentation of the Empire in the much used grey or even black colours. The author does not see the remarkable differences between Peter the Great and his heirs, classifying all of them in the same infamous category of authoritarianism—the only exception being Nicholas II. However, as pointed out somewhere by Priest Lev Lebedev, there is no accident that the only tsars venerated by the Bolshevik revolutionaries have been Peter and Ivan the Terrible, the reason being their fight against Orthodoxy, and its negative effects on the Russian society. Even setting aside personal evaluations of the tsars, very different in their politics, Besançon completely misses

the description. It is also serious when the author follows Michelet, for whom everything in the tsars' Russia is only a lie. Everyone lies, from villein to tsar, passing through the priest, in a civil disorder, aspiring to the "Grace universe" and makes the people believe themselves "one with the gods". Hence, although he explicitly rejects the thesis in his book, Besançon seems to suggest continuity in essence between the Tsars' Empire and the Soviet Empire. The essay of the French historian starts with the following statement: "The technique of lying is as old as Russia."

The "Slavophiles" are not pictured in brighter lights. The synthesised ideas of Ivan Kireevski, although prolific, are "monotonous", while the works of Ceaadaev show the touch of an "exceptional thinker". Question of taste, some would say, but a taste that betrays a high intolerance to the Eastern Christian religion and accomplice sympathy for the pre-revolutionary nihilism. Dostoevsky is not pictured better in the book either. The writer of the "Demons" "hates" Catholicism, atheist socialism, and the Jews, although again the quotes or the references for this last, and highly debatable opinion are missing. As a matter of fact, Dostoevsky's portrait is influenced by an unfair use of nationalist categories. In the famous part from the Siberian mine where the exiled writer has the revelation of the intrinsic kindness of the Russian peasant, Besançon explains that Dostoevsky "makes a pact with the bandits because they are Russians", while the "hate" for the Polish "occurs because he is European and speaks French". In reality, the real reason was Orthodoxy and not ethnicity. For all the Slavophiles, to be Russian means to be Orthodox, and the ones leaving this belief were leaving the country, as noted even by Besançon in the book, which decisively separates the Slavophilic trend from the noose of the xenophobe nationalism. Also, Besançon complains that Dostoevsky has forgotten the Catholic Slavs, which, basically, represents an additional argument against ethnic nationalism. For the Slavophile, the cross is borne by the people.

Finally, a “technical” deficiency of the essay, but revealing much about the work as a whole, lies in the quoted works. Russian histories are completely missing, under the pretext that “the nationalist historiography exaggerates too much the Western threat”. Even under these circumstances, there is enough diversity within Russian histories (see for instance the consistent differences between Tihomirov and Lebedev when interpreting Peter the Great) so that Besançon could have relatively easily avoided this critique. Instead, our author prefers to quote Emil Cioran (!)—not only for a description of Ivan the Terrible—, or a controversial historian, Orlando Figes, for a presentation of the pre-revolutionary Russia (“the tsarist state was decomposing at the beginning of the 20th century”), description conflicting with one vision of Besançon revealed only several pages further (“The property and the law started to be acknowledged. Economy was booming (...). In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, Russia was considered to find its place in the civilised community of Europe”).

Unfortunately, there are few good things to say about “Holy Russia”. Maybe, however, it would be suitable to follow the author's advice expressed at the end of the book and turn to the work of Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu in an attempt to see how Russia really looks like.