

Paul W. Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths. Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia*, Oxford University Press, 2014. 288 p. ISBN 978-0199-591-77-0

Paul W. Werth is unquestionably an expert on Imperial Russian confessional policy, known and appreciated in the academic world for his long years of continuous research. His monograph *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths. Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia*, published in 2014, pursues the concept of Russia as a confessional state (the founder Robert Crews is mentioned in the monograph numerous times), and presents an analysis/deliberation (especially in Chapter Nine) on how the confessional state reacted, or could have reacted, to the challenges of modernity. Thus, the author does not ignore the intention mentioned in the introduction to show how 'an autocratic regime with investments in religiously constituted forms of morality and authority sought to enlist the foreign faiths in the exercise of imperial rule and the projection of imperial power' (p. 3). The book is fundamentally research into Imperial Russian confessional policy in the long 19th century. What is new is that in the research, the author concentrates on concepts of tolerance, religious freedom and freedom of conscience, and their expression in practice. 'What role the concepts of toleration and religious liberty play in shaping the relations between Russia's predominant Orthodox faith and its other religious traditions, such as Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism? How did these concepts frame practices of imperial rule and the character of Russian politics?' (p. 3). He also presents and analyses the wide context of how these concepts (tolerance and freedom of religion and conscience) functioned in Europe and the Russian Empire. In evaluating the European 'religious toleration' context, he states: 'Viewed against this background, Russia's religious order does not stand out quite as much as her critics would have us believe' (p. 124). The author's insights on how the concept of 'freedom of conscience' changed are also significant. He analyses how the concept developed in the Orthodox Church, and in the lay population as well, among Slavophiles and liberals (pp. 188–189) in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is important to note that it is considered as a phenomenon of Orthodoxy, not as a generalising concept applicable to every non-Orthodox church. In the research, he details the complications encountered when realising the so-called decree on tolerance of 17 April 1905. The book analyses the 'fate' of tolerance and religious freedom from early modern

times to the breakthrough decree of 17 April 1905, as well as the situation of various confessions and faiths following its announcement until 1915. I do not doubt the importance of this research in historiography, and would like to share some brief insights that came to me while reading the book.

Talking about the structure of the research, it is notable that each chapter has its own conclusions. And what is really noticeable is the author's consistency and attention to the reader, as each chapter has a logical structure, and is related to earlier and later chapters. There are commentaries on these links not just at the beginning of each chapter, but throughout the whole course of the research. The entire book's operating 'apparatus', the List of Tables, List of Maps, List of Figures, Abbreviations and Citations, Note to Reader, Select Bibliography, and an extended General Index (pp. 275–288), demonstrates his high academic quality and respect for the reader. A comprehensive and informative introduction, with statistical data and commentaries on the empire's confessional structure, is given at the start of the book, as well as an analysis of the 'legacy' of early modernism (Early Modern Bequest, pp. 30–45). The dynamics of confessional ruling structures is analysed (Chapter Two, The Multiconfessional Establishment; also p. 4). Incidentally, we could expect a more detailed explanation of the author's and Elena Vyshlenkova's research in relation to each other in this part.¹ Further on (Chapter Three, Matters of Integrity), he analyses how the striving towards an integrated/united confessional structure was expressed in the empire, what the opportunities for missions were, and who initiated them. In stating the former unchanging concept of religious dependence, he notes and discusses its dynamics: 'Subjects born into the faith of their parents and ancestors would remain true to those religious traditions. But the actual situation in Russia was more dynamic' (p. 74). I think we could specify whether the author's concept 'Christian *ecumenism*' (my italics) is taken from the historiography presented in footnote 49 on page 86, or whether it is the author's own assessment when describing the processes from the time of Alexander I, especially the activities of missions (pp. 85–86). In that case, I would ask whether they can be described using this concept?

The research consistently analyses the problem of opportunities to change faith, examining how the imperial government's position changed on this matter, and how confessions and faiths were assessed differently. At the end of the third chapter (Chapter Three, sub-section 'Conversions Beyond Orthodoxy', p. 91), the author notes: 'Furthermore, while the state generally promoted conversion to Orthodoxy in various ways, it also preferred that this occurs as a result of conscious deliberation, rather than haste, coercion, or material motivations [...] But there seems also to have

¹ Е. Вишленкова, *Заботясь о душах подданных: Религиозная политика России первой четверти XIX века* (Саратов, 2002).

been a growing consciousness among statesmen that spiritual convictions of the individual merited respect as the basis for religious self-definition.’ The author admits that this was not a universal position, claiming the fact ‘that this view was still not shared universally among officialdom and did not trump other considerations helps to explain the fact of mass conversions as late as the 1870s (see Chapter Six) and the refusal to liberalize laws on conversion until 1905’. In my opinion, saying that this was not a universal position, or that it did not trump other provisions, is not enough. The author should have given a clearer commentary on the extent to which the ‘spiritual convictions of the individual merited respect as the basis for religious self-definition’ was expressed in practice, when this provision was most widespread, and how it correlated with the hundreds of thousands of ‘converts’ to Orthodoxy in 1863–1867 (for more, see pp. 156–157). In my view, the author’s own subsequent claim about the rejection of a liberalisation of laws shows that it was not the position of respecting the individual’s choice that dominated, but the provision blocking a more liberal position. The very identification of these various positions is significant in the author’s research, yet we could expect a more detailed assessment: how marginal or dominant were they?

The author looks at the era of major reforms, and sees the relations between the state and the various confessions in its context (Chapter Five, Prospects of Reform, pp. 128–148; Chapter Six, Depolitizing Piety, Russifying Faith, pp. 149–178). However, the context of these reforms, or at least mention of them, is missing from Chapter Four (The Rhetoric and Content of Religious Toleration). The author does mention the reform atmosphere (p. 150, etc), and it is in this sense that the research is incorporated into the historiographic discourse of the last decade, which highlights the Russian Empire as being in a state of constant reform, and the creation of a national state.² But not enough attention is given to how these reforms were put into practice. In certain socio-political contexts, it shows the content of the empire-wide reform process, and thus could specify the content of ‘tolerance’ and ‘religious freedom’.

In addition, taking into account the social, political and cultural sense of the peasant liberation reforms, we cannot ignore the paternalistic attitudes to this estate which remained unchanged. This approach adds colour to our understanding of how the confessional dependence of people from this estate, or its change, was viewed. In the summer of 1867 in Vilnius, Alexandra II declared to peasants who had converted to Orthodoxy that

² Е. Вишленкова, *Заботясь о душах подданных; Западные окраины Российской империи*, сост., М. Долбилов, А. Миллер (Москва, 2006); М. Долбилов, *Русский край, чужая вера: этноконфессиональная политика империи в Литве и Белоруссии при Александре II* (Москва, 2010).

she would never allow them to revert to their former faith.³ And this was not merely a quirk of rhetorical language.

The author notes how the uprising of 1863 changed the ratio between the autocracy and Catholicism, while relations with the Catholic Church after 1863 challenged the 'conception of religious toleration' (p. 149). The author acknowledges that changes in the Kingdom of Poland were more evident: 'the autocracy also effectuated a substantial reorientation of its relations with Catholicism after 1863. The break was perhaps greatest in the kingdom [of Poland], where comparatively little had changed since the creation of the post-Napoleonic order in 1817 (see Chapter Two)' (p. 154). In addition, the author notes and evaluates the pan-European context of the post-uprising repressions and 'anti-Catholic measures' (p. 158). The uprising of 1863 undoubtedly corrected the government's position, but its measures that were applied in the Kingdom of Poland in terms of the Catholic Church can be viewed not just as specific post-uprising repressions, but in the broader context of the government's unification policies (of course, I am not suggesting that these intentions arose without the challenges of the uprising), the last decades of the 19th century were noted for the efforts to unite the organisation and the management of the Catholic Church in the empire and in the Kingdom of Poland (I make such claims having in mind the government's approach towards the education of clergymen, the status of the Russian language in seminaries, and the government's control of the clergy's social mobility). In the sixth chapter, the author also shows how the concept of nationalism corrected, or 'demoted' the status of religion, placing it below language and other aspects of secular culture (p. 151). But the author also notes that 'in any event, even as the regime spoke of Russification with greater urgency, the state was still left with an institutional order constructed on the basis of religion rather than nationality' (p. 152). Also: 'Even as confessional policy continued to reflect the specificities of religion, to a degree at least religious institutions became the instruments and the objects of the autocracy's efforts to manage and manipulate national differences' (p. 152).

I sometimes missed a more detailed commentary deliberating 'the possibility of Russifying Catholicism in the region' (p. 167). What region does he have in mind? He could indicate that, in terms of the administration of the Catholic Church, this region consisted of the dioceses of Minsk, Vilnius and Samogitia (Telšiai). He could have mentioned that the link between the Diocese of Minsk and the Diocese of Vilnius was special: the Diocese of Minsk (whose limits coincided with the boundaries of the province of Minsk) was abolished at the initiative of the secular

³ 'Пребывание Государя Императора в Вильне', *Виленьская губернская ведомости*, 62, 63 (1867), pp. 172–173; 'Пребывание Государя Императора в Вильне. Вильна 11–13 июня', *Вестник Западной России*, кн. IV, т. II (1867), pp. 70–76.

government in 1869, and until 1883 it was under the jurisdiction of the supervisor of the Diocese of Vilnius, Petras Žilinskis (incidentally, he was never the Bishop of Vilnius, as the author indicates on p. 169), while the appointment of clergymen in the province of Minsk was controlled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The government's policies differed, not only depending on the confession, but also within the structure, in the dioceses, of the confession itself. I also noticed that the situation in the Northwest Region was analysed almost without including the Diocese of Samogitia (Telšiai), which included the provinces of Kaunas and Courland. The Diocese of Samogitia (Telšiai) had its own special characteristics: it was not noted for mass conversions after the decree of 17 April 1905, yet Bishop Leonardas Mečislovas Paliulionis and a majority of the clergy were noted for their demands for religious freedom and the performance of religious practices from as early as the last decades of the 19th century. I should add that the author has conducted research on how the decree of 17 April 1905 was realised in this diocese as well,⁴ which is why he could have made wider use of his material, not just including it as a reference.

What also caught my attention is that the government's measures in the case of the Belarusian provinces are reconstructed mostly based on and citing the study by Alexander Bendin (for example, p. 247, footnote 35, which gives the full title of Bendin's work). However, the author's association with this work, or his historiographical point of view, is not clearly identified, either throughout the course of the research, or in the introduction. Bendin's (un)described problems have been analysed by other researchers as well.⁵ Of course, the author might not be able to read Lithuanian, but some of the monographs written in this language do have abstracts in Polish and English.

While there is commentary on some of the concepts used in the research in the Note to Reader section, I did notice that others were overlooked. For example, there is a comment on how Ruthenia is understood 'to designate those lands, now roughly Ukraine and Belarus, and their people, that passed from Polish to Russian and Austrian rule in the partitions of 1772–95'. I think it would have been worthwhile to add that 'the partitions of 1772–95' did not affect Poland (as was mentioned in the earlier citation on p. 3), but the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (especially as 'the Commonwealth' is used on p. 72). Meanwhile, comments on the con-

⁴ П. Верт, 'Трудный путь к католицизму. оисповедная принадлежность и гражданское состояние после 1905 года', *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, t. 26 (2005), pp. 447–474.

⁵ Other researchers have written on this topic, for example: А. Смоленчук, 'Попытки введения русского языка в католическое богослужение в Минской и Виленской диоцезиях. 60–70-е гг. XIX в.', *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, t. 20 (2002), pp. 141–154.

cepts 'the Kingdom of Poland', 'the empire', 'the empire proper' (p. 155), or the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a subject that did indeed experience the partitions are lacking. Again, he uses the term for the historic Polish lands ('a major uprising in the lands of historic Poland in 1863', p. 128). I would say that the English-speaking reader would benefit from a more detailed explanation of what is meant by 'historic Poland'.

The author has noticed and revealed how the confessional state became its own hostage, and could not completely realise its declared tolerance, its promised freedom of conscience, even after announcing the so-called decree on tolerance. He shows the variety of confessions and faiths in the confessional state, and the variety in the state's provisions on tolerance and freedom of religion. The disclosure of this variety and dynamics work towards this book's merit, allowing us to see and analyse deeper the situation of separate confessions and faiths in the Russian Empire, appreciating the power and significance of the Orthodox Church.

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"Excellent...The Tsar's Foreign Faiths is the wisest sustained discussion in any language of religious freedom in Russia."--Slavic Review. "Those teaching the history of Imperial Russia at university level would be well served by adding this work to their syllabus. Far from being a straightforward history of religion, Werth offers up a highly stimulating study that reveals a great deal about the Russian state's broad attitude towards toleration and freedom of conscience. More generally, anyone interested in the complex practices of imperial rule in Russia, beset as it Recognition of multiple faiths meant that Russia could boast of its regime of religious "tolerance" and its avoidance of the wars of religion that devastated its European neighbors. However, religion like everything else in the 19th century did not hold still. 12This comment is intended to enlarge the already generous frame of reference that Werth offers us in The Tsar's Foreign Faiths. A more worldly perspective would mean opening up further the question of origins of Moscovy's habits of rule, including approaches to religion"what Werth calls "early modern bequests"and it would force us to confront the ongoing appeal of regulatory confessional politics in large and populous states beyond Europe's confines. The Tsar's Foreign Faiths shows that the resulting tensions be The Russian Empire presented itself to its subjects and the world as an Orthodox state, a patron and defender of Eastern Christianity. Yet the tsarist regime also lauded itself for granting religious freedoms to its many heterodox subjects, making 'religious toleration' a core attribute of the state's identity. In this panoramic account, Paul W. Werth explores the scope and character of religious freedom for Russia's diverse non-Orthodox religions, from Lutheranism and Catholicism to Islam and Buddhism. Considering both rhetoric and practice, he examines discourses of religious toleration and the role of confessional institutions in the empire's governance. Download Citation | On Jan 1, 2017, Vilma ½altauskaitÄ— published Paul W. Werth, The Tsar's Foreign Faiths. Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia, Oxford University Press, 2014. 288 p. ISBN 978-0199-591-77-0 | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia, Oxford University Press, 2014. 288 p. ISBN 978-0199-591-77-0. January 2017.