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Greene, Robert H. *Bodies like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press. 2010. xii+299. Notes. Selected Bibliography. Index. xii+299. \$42.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-87580-409-5

In this carefully researched, highly readable and remarkably well documented volume, Robert Greene examines popular devotion to the cult of saints in late imperial and early Soviet Russia. In the Introduction he indicates that three methodological principles inform his approach: 1) religious practice is meaningful; 2) religious practices and rituals are imbedded in theological knowledge; 3) religion is a dynamic and developing process. Given these principles, Greene seeks in the book to address basic questions such as how Russian Orthodox believers, through their devotional practices, related to the saints in heaven or as he states: "why do long-dead saints matter to the living faithful (6)," and, perhaps more fundamentally, how does a study of this nature allow one to challenge what he calls the "long-dominant paradigm" that views the Russian faithful as semiliterate ritualists, "barely conversant with the most rudimentary doctrines of the faith (6)?" Related to this and particularly relevant to the time period, is the flexibility of religious practice and how it can adapt even in times of great change such as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Greene frames the book with consideration of the Orthodox notion of bodily incorruptibility as it developed in the late imperial period. He effectively demonstrates that in its mission to improve the religious knowledge of believers and improve their spiritual lives, the Orthodox Church focused considerable attention on incorruptibility as a sign of God's grace and salvation, manifest in the bodies of those pleasing to Him, and the claimed abundant presence of these bodies in Russian Orthodoxy as proof of its rightful place as Christ's true Church. According to Greene, the faithful, however, looked to the saints not so much as models of the exemplary Christian life leading to salvation, but as miracle workers who were able to meet a variety of specific needs in their

lives. Greene shows that believers cultivated complex relationships with their saints' uncorrupted bodies or in many cases bones—incorruptibility was not necessarily the issue—which directly benefitted them or their families, but at the same time obligated them to reciprocate by visiting their graves, interacting physically with the saints by touching or kissing the holy relics, offering prayers, lighting votive candles, pledging donations, etc. Although the saints through the Holy Spirit were believed to see and hear the faithful no matter where they were, Greene demonstrates through effective examples that it was their shrines that were considered to be the preferred access point for their intercessory powers. By citing a wide variety of sources, but focusing in depth on a much smaller number of saints, Greene is able to effectively present his case.

The Soviet period, of course, is very different. The authorities focus on incorruptibility and emphasize the exhumation of the bodies of saints in order to debunk the whole notion of uncorrupted bodies. In describing the seizure of the relics of St. Aleksandr at the Aleksandro-Svirski Monastery, Greene notes that the “authorities were perhaps no less stunned than the clergymen, who watched as the shrouds were pulled back to reveal a wax effigy of the saint in place of an incorruptible body” (125). In order to exploit such findings, and humiliate the clergy, provincial justice administrations charged some Orthodox clerics with relic fraud. Greene very clearly demonstrates, however, that a basic misunderstanding of the thinking of ordinary believers undermined the Bolshevik regime's position. Orthodox believers most relied on the miracle-working power of the saints, whether the relics were incorruptible or not. It was the local presence of the saint and his or her accessibility to devotional practice that was essential.

In an essay very pertinent to Greene's study, but likely not available to him, titled “On Holy Relics,” published posthumously in a private collection in Paris in 1992 and translated by Boris Jakim (*Relics and Miracles*, William B. Eerdmans, 2011), Orthodox theologian,

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Sergei Bulgakov, writing in 1918, addresses the Bolshevik regime's "desecration" of icons by first providing an answer to the question: "What exactly are holy relics and what are the content and meaning of the dogma of the veneration of holy relics?"(3). Bulgakov maintains that since the practice dates from the time of the martyrs when bodies were burned or dismembered, it clearly does not require that the remains be incorruptible. He attributes the latter notion to a popular perception among the people, which was then "hypocritically" reinforced by church officials who in some cases intentionally created "bodies" for the saints when the real bodies no longer existed. Rather than incorruptibility, Bulgakov writes that the cause of the glorification of a saint consists in his/her holiness and the presence of the Holy Spirit. This position is also supported, of course, by the biblical reference to the miracle working power of the bones of Elisha (2 Kings 13:21). It is apposite to note that Bulgakov's notion that in the mortal body of the saint, the seed of incorruptibility is already present but only apparent to the eyes of faith (34), supports Greene's position that Orthodox believers in their veneration of holy relics were more theologically astute than is generally recognized. For Bulgakov, the mold and corruptibility of the relics is not really in them, but in us: "when we see and offer this spoilage, we are like those servants of Antichrist, who in poking around in holy relics, brought to light nothing but the spoilage of their own souls" (35). Just the same, Greene may give the faithful a bit too much credit in his argument, for though they displayed considerable veneration for holy relics and their location even when not incorruptible, to some extent it is very likely that the emphasis on incorruptibility that led in some cases to the creation of "bodies" made of straw and rags, did not come only from the clergy, but, as Bulgakov suggests, was a result of pressure from the faithful in their zeal for extolling the virtues of their local saints (4).

The Soviet regime's misunderstanding of the reaction of ordinary believers and the Orthodox Church in general was clearly a major reason for the ultimate lack of success of the exhumations. They were ineffective and eventually abandoned for a more scientific approach, which sought to demonstrate that if miracles

are desired, they could be best sought through science. Lenin's preserved body is a prominent example, but ironically, especially in light of the exhumations, after the collapse of the Soviet Union there have been suggestions, most recently by the historian Vladimir Lavrov in an interview appearing in "*Argumenty i fakty Evropy*," that the body exhibited in the Mausoleum could be a doll (No.50, 1675, p. 50. 12-18 December 2012).

The resurgence of the Orthodox Church in Russia since 1991 and its renewed influence in Russian society demand our attention and make excellent studies like Greene's essential to our understanding of religious practice in the late Imperial period, religious repression in the early Soviet period, as well as the role of religion in contemporary Russia.

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