

When Russian clergy learned to read: reading practices of the Russian clergy in 1750-1850

Dear colleagues,

My interest in this subject arose while studying autobiographies of Russian clergymen. It was part of the project *The Church Speaks* — project of the German Historical Institute in Moscow, which I represent here. Reading and books are not mentioned in autobiographical writing and clergymen's memoirs all too often, yet they feature often enough to allow posing some general questions:

By default, modern reading, - that is, silent and private¹ leisure time reading - is understood to constitute part of the process of personality becoming more rational and society more secular. How does clergy of the post-Petrine period fit in this context? What place does reading have in their daily practices and in creating their self-awareness as a social estate and as individuals? How is clergy different in this respect from the nobility and other social groups? How does reading generally affect the new piety of post-Petrine Russia?

Autobiographical writings are a peculiar historical source, in that one ought to consider not just what they state explicitly, but also what they pass over in silence. For instance, a Smolensk-based priest Nikifor Murzakevitch² never once mentions reading and books in his journals, yet we know him as an author of a book on the history of Smolensk and a number of other works. Ego-documents, on the other hand, allow verifying the often-misleading formal data (for example, no other documentary evidence would shed the light on the gap between receiving a book and the fact of its reading). In my view, clergymen's autobiographical writings and other relevant materials (like proprietary markings and notes) provide a basis for a fruitful attempt to understand what has customarily been ignored by the otherwise respect-worthy Soviet *bibliology* (*knigovedenie*): not just when and what was read, but also how and to what end.

What follows are brief preliminary theses:

Two conflicting processes in the history of clergy determine the picture: a successful institutionalization of clerical education and an unsuccessful cultural *homogenization* of the clerical estate. A universal educational standard, established as early as in the eighteenth century, made literacy a condition *sine qua non* for ordination as a priest and for carrying out clerical duties. Later on, reading became imperative also for non-liturgical activities, such as religious discussions with parishioners and public readings. However, the clerical estate's multiple *modi vivendi* remained so diverse that, in fact, not one but several clerical subcultures came to exist. Not only educated monastics ('black clergy'),³ but also the 'well-to-do' secular priests ('white clergy') — more often than not urban residents affiliated with large cathedrals, — plus a small group of army chaplains belong to the category of 'ecclesiastical intelligentsia.'⁴ Mostly *these* three groups of clergymen left us their autobiographical testimony.

In the eighteenth century and up to the early nineteenth, there was no specifically ecclesiastical reading canon. Long enough there was no clear-cut distinction between the *secular* and the *sacred* at all. In this sense, we ought not to project our notion of '*spiritual*' literature onto the eighteenth century, simply because this notion did not yet exist. The history of clerical reading is thus largely the history of spiritual literature's appearing and acquiring an audience.

Up to the time of Catherine the Great and even further, the book cultures of the *first* and *second estates*, nobility and clergy were similar both in this indistinctiveness of secular/sacred and also in that both read predominantly handwritten materials.⁵

Reading was still inseparable from copying.⁶ As proprietary marks show, *both* estates were in the habit of re-reading the same piece many times over.⁷ Both were 'omnivorous' — *hence* the popularity of handwritten *collections* of various kinds, from purely catechetical to didactic to miscellaneous.

Religious literature was read for the sake of the positive «acquisition of knowledge of the divine law»,⁸ - *this* was the definition of enlightened piety.⁹

But what *we* would call ‘spiritual literature,’ on the other hand, attracted readers especially due to its irrationality and the miraculous¹⁰ serving as a necessary counterbalance to the rationality of the secular state. Here, too, the interests of readers from the two estates intersected. This genre reached its climax in the Masonic and peri-Masonic writings and on the wave of mysticism under Alexander I.

‘Mystic’ literature would remain at the core of clergy’s reading culture throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. What is more, this would be the case at *every level*: from the metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov), who filled his diary with excerpts from the French spiritualism in the original language, to, say, residents of small district townships in the Podolia¹¹ or Kostroma¹² provinces, which we know from their diaries.

The matter of clerical reading comes to the fore of the governmental and Synodal policies under Catherine II. As part of her project of refashioning clergy into the ‘middle class,’ the empress was the first to propose ‘extracurricular reading’ for seminaries, so that students – quote - “would benefit from reading useful and edifying books, for without such reading, school classes alone are insufficient for a proper education.”¹³ Upon graduation too, the government encouraged clergymen -quote - “to practice reading essential and beneficial books whenever they have time to spare from chaplaincy and liturgical services, which books they must by all means try to procure for themselves.”¹⁴ Ecclesiastical authorities¹⁵ as *well* started to prescribe that priests read books at home.¹⁶ In his 1775 *Instruction for Provosts*, metropolitan Plato II (Levshin) listed not only the requisite liturgical books, but also the desired contents of parish libraries; which from that time in came to existence.

These lists were later multiplied and updated in other dioceses.¹⁷

It was during this period that the concept of *edifying*, or *didactic* literary genre, borrowed mainly from Protestant religious practices, came into use. This concept separated the two functions of reading: *Erbauung* (edification) and

Entertainment. This distinction transpires, for example, from Alexander Levshin's (brother of metropolitan Plato) polemic introduction to his *Historical Description... of Uspenskii Cathedral*, where he draws a line between the 'entertaining' reading and one that 'edifies.'¹⁸

Reading became an indispensable part of the new piety, which presupposed reflection on what was being read. It was precisely at this point that the notion of a *чтец/reader* was transposed from a clergyman onto an individual consumer of reading matter.¹⁹ See, for example, what bishop Tikhon of Zadonsk writes to a young nobleman in Petersburg about 1780:

"There is no better place for you than a place of solitude, where I advise you to move to and start by first reading the Holy Bible and giving consideration to the various divine affairs it will present you with; and always, day and night, draw lessons from it, and read through [Iohannes] Arndt; as for all the other books, read them as if visiting, and sharpen your *mind and will* for the better, and wait for the divine vocation — for when and where God calls, and thus *be at peace*."²⁰

Along with mentioned German pietist Johannes Arndt, an absolute bestseller — François Fénelon, - who is highly esteemed both by average priests and the nobility, calls too for combining prayer with the so-called *lectio divina*, with 'reading and contemplation'²¹ — a practice used in Europe since the Middle Ages, but just arriving in Russia with this newest influx of literature.

Thus, reading becomes intrinsic part of what the Orthodox tradition calls the 'inner man's life' — the way to achieve *peace* / greek *hesychia* part of a dialogue with the metaphysical,²² whether directly through the Bible or through other authors' mediation. It is impossible to overestimate the significance of this change, as well as the impact reading had on the traditional religious practices, such as a prayer or preparation for receiving the Mysteries. Like formerly on pictures of St. Jerome in Europe, the books appear even on the traditional Russian icons, *like on these two...* This had an immediate effect on

autobiographic writing too: if Dimitry of Rostov in his late seventeenth – first half of the eighteenth century *Diariusz/Diary* records only dreams and visions as elements of his ‘inner life’²³, metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov)’s journals of the first half of the nineteenth century speak *predominantly* of reading. Excerpts in Russian, French, and Latin are interspersed in Filaret’s journals of the 1820-1830s with his own essay, *matching* the contents and style of this readings with the title *On Peace*.²⁴ The evolution is especially evident in comparison with the so-called ‘booklover’s diary’ from Yekaterinburg, which is a journal of a late eighteenth-century cathedral archpriest Theodor Karpinsky. Karpinsky reads *a lot*: among others, Rousseau, Voltaire, even Erasmus of Rotterdam in Latin, — but his reading runs parallel to his clerical and religious life: the two do not intersect. Rather, the opposite is true: reading tends to interrupt his normal activities. (For example,

he reads late into the night and barely makes it to the liturgy the next morning. He mentions Erasmus, but only to say that it gives him a toothache; or this – quote - : “... [we] drank three glasses of punch each, I read the memorable stories of Frederick II... in the morning and then in the afternoon at home, in the evening... was drunk”).

To summarize:

In my view, by analyzing the cultural transfers it is vital to keep comparing clergy to the nobility. Because starting from mid-eighteenth-century both the first and the ‘second’ estates in Russia experienced a common trend. It entailed an internalization of civility (or civic-mindedness), the ethos of service *along* with the internalization of piety. Instead of the – quote - “sense of strictest subjection” to the Divine law,²⁵ the piety was now based on the personal emotional affection. Reading – to the great extent in 18th century reading of the non-orthodox Western literature - plays a key role here and leads further to the Orthodox revivalism of the 19th century.

Literariness and fictionalism are present in the aristocratic and clerical autobiographies alike and emerge in reading novels as well as in reading saints' *vitae* (*chetji minei*) or *Imitatio Christi*.

At the same time, the distinction between the secular and the sacred becomes clearer by the turn of the nineteenth century, and so does the division between the readerships of the two educated estates. This is due to the limits on social mobility and a failure to turn Russian clergy into a sort of *clerisy*, *Bildungsbürgertum*.²⁶ Clergy clearly tended to create their own reading canon and even their own language. The core of this canon consisted of the pre-Pushkin classics of the 18th century — from Lomonosov to Derzhavin, regarded as appropriate for spiritual aims, as edifying. Whereas even Karamzin was originally banned from seminary libraries. Why? Here is a quote from an autobiography by Irinarkh Vvedensky, a future writer, who in 1821 was a student at the district seminary in Penza. His father — a village priest, by the way, — brought him a book by Lomonosov, and Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveler*. He remarked about the latter that – quote - “it is good for nothing, so don't read it, really”. The young priestling, however, did not just read it, but also called it “the first book that I read *with love*”. And *that* was actually the point: clergy was not meant to produce *bibliophilia*, typical to the nobility. As expressed in Pushkin's last words addressed to his books: *Farewell, my friends*,²⁷ or “*My dearest books*” by young nobleman Ivan Opochinin before suicide. That meant that clergy did not produce *book culture*, like reading circles which played such a pivotal role in the secular Enlightenment, at least if we follow Jurgen Habermas. Books were regarded by clergy as the means, not the ends: - quote - “The internal dialogue with oneself, — writes seminary student Alexander Gorsky in his journal in the 1830s, — must take place ‘in the heart, where life is,’ not in the head, which is used for reading: *all books do* is ‘incite religious reverie’”.²⁸

Returning now back to our Irinarch Vvedensky, reading Karamzin: The same year he wrote to his father,- quote - “Daddy dearest, please do not send me griddle cakes (*лепешки*), but rather more of Karamzin.” The *Letters* moved Irinarkh first to learn French in secret - from the *Nouvelle Eloise*, while hiding in the attic - and then German. Finally *this* reading became his first step towards *leaving* the clerical estate.²⁹