The Polemic Concerning Church Slavonic

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During the 1990s, immediately after the end of the Soviet Union, a debate began in the ROC about the position of Church Slavonic in the liturgy. Several priests and intellectuals started a plea for the use of Russian instead of Church Slavonic, which most people no longer understood. Georgii Kochetkov, priest at a well-attended parish in the centre of Moscow, was the first to introduce Russian into the liturgy. He had translated the texts anew from Greek. Kochetkov’s attempt to bring believers closer to the liturgy appealed to his churchgoers, amongst whom was the Byzantologist Sergei Averintsev.

Soon a campaign against Georgii Kochetkov was initiated by conservatives. He was accused of heresy, partly because, besides using the vernacular, he had made a few minor liturgical changes, namely reading the words of consecration out loud and leaving the middle door of the iconostasis open. In 1994, Kochetkov’s beautiful church on the Bol’shaya Lubyanka was given to the restored Sretenskii monastery. For some years, Kochetkov was able to hold his Russian services in a nearby church, until he was forbidden to perform the Eucharist altogether in 1997. In 2000, a theological investigation committee announced that Kochetkov was no heretic, at the same time accusing him of formulating his ideas unclearly. Since then, he may again hold services.

Today, Kochetkov’s translation of the liturgy is recognised as a contribution to Russian culture and essential to study and religious teaching. In 2007–2009 the translation in a new, six-volume edition was published under the title Православное богослужение [Orthodox liturgy], and on 13 May 2011 it was officially presented to the Russian National Library in St Petersburg, with the blessing of Metropolitan Vladimir of St Petersburg. But the campaign against the priest and his publications continues, especially on conservative websites.

1 Русифицированные тексты вечерни, утрени, литургии св. Иоанна Златоуста, пер. свящ. Г. Кочеткова, вступ. слово С. Аверинцева [Russianized Texts of Vespers, Matins and the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, trans. Priest G. Kochetkov, introd. S. Averintsev] (Moscow, 1994). Revised reprints in 1999, 2002, and 2004. This Russian translation is the first since the one by the priest Vasilii Adamenko from the 1920s, and is more complete and scientific.

2 Georgii Kochetkov is director of а theological school for laymen, which he founded in 1992 with the approval of the patriarchate. In 2002 renamed Свято-Филаретовский Православно-Христианский Институт [St Filaret Orthodox-Christian Institute], it is the only independent theological college for laymen in Moscow.
In this article, I wish to discuss a book from 1999, which is a complete rejection of the replacement of Church Slavonic by modern Russian. It is entitled Богослужебный язык Русской Церкви. История. Попытки реформации [The Liturgical Language of the Russian Church. History. Attempts of Reformation], published by the above-mentioned Sretenskii monastery ‘with the blessing of Patriarch Aleksii II’. It is a volume containing sixteen polemic articles by contemporary authors and six articles from the first decennia of the twentieth century. In an appendix, it also contains reports on the treatment of the language question at the Local Council of the ROC in 1917–1918. The aim of my analysis is to gain insight into the arguments of the defendants of Church Slavonic, their style, choice of words, methods of disqualification, use of historical facts, and analogies with non-orthodox Christian confessions.4

**Origin of the Problem**

The discussion about the language of the Russian Orthodox service is not of recent origin, but dates from two centuries ago. In a historical summary, G. Korob’in and N. Mikhailova show that the problem of русификация [Russianization] of Church Slavonic developed around 1800.5 In the Middle Ages, they argue, the Russian people had no difficulty with the simultaneous existence of a ‘higher’ book language and a ‘lower’ spoken one, as it was all один язык [one language] with two different areas of use. The higher one was for God and the lower for daily life. At the end of the eighteenth century, members of the enlightened intelligentsia began to qualify Church Slavonic as ‘primitive’, compared to the emerging cultural language of Russian literature. A new language situation had been created: двуязычие [bilinguism].

The authors believe that criticism of Church Slavonic was used as part of anti-religious propaganda, since the believers themselves, including the peasants, had no difficulties with it. The criticism was an expression of religious