Orthodox Reform in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

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“Are you, the Ruthenian, not suffering from infantile reasoning, you who used to be a pious Christian...but having lived with the Poles you became child-like and divided, abandoned Christ and split into the Papist, the Evangelical, the Anabaptist, and the observer of the Sabbath?” Thus the monk Ivan Vishenskii (c. 1550–1620), a self-appointed guardian of his nation’s ancestral faith, chided his Orthodox compatriots and fellow-believers, writing from the spiritual heights of Mount Athos. Contrary to the prevalent opinion in contemporary historiography that the Eastern Orthodox Church remained unaffected by the spread of Protestantism, Vishenskii’s diatribe highlights both the fears of Orthodox religious activists and the realities of the confessional situation in Poland-Lithuania at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries.

To the historian of religious change in Europe in its evangelical forms, such as the German, Swiss, or English Reformations, the truth of the statement that “the Orthodox churches have not experienced a Reformation” seems incontrovertible. Indeed, in no area of Europe, where the population was exclusively or predominantly Eastern Orthodox in the early modern period, did Protestantism become a religion of the elites or of the masses. This was not always for lack of trying on the part of secular rulers who at times adopted new religious teaching and wished to impose it on their subjects. Yet those scholars whose expertise extends to Catholic revival in the 16th and 17th centuries

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should think twice before dismissing the Orthodox Church as a potential area of research into the processes of religious renewal in the confessional age.

Linguistic barriers, political dislocations of the twentieth century, and a fragmentation of vision attendant on narrow historical specializations have conspired to obscure the attempts within the Orthodox Church to give it a new lease of life in the atmosphere of intense confessional rivalry characteristic of the period of religious change. To begin with, the range and availability of documentary evidence have largely determined historiographic outcomes. From the 1840s to the start of the First World War, learned associations in Imperial Russia, such as the national and regional Commissions for the Study of Archaeography (“arkheograficheskie komissii”), undertook a series of large-scale publishing projects, aimed to make widely available documentary materials from the late medieval and early modern periods. Despite an occasionally tendentious selection of documents, for example, suppressing material that could belie Imperial Russia’s “historic claim” to its western borderlands against the counter-claims of Polish nationalists, this was a pivotal development that gave momentum to subsequent conceptualisation of the history of the region. By 1914 extensive publication of primary sources had enabled historians to produce a range of scholarly contributions that shed light in particular upon the effects of the spread of Protestantism on the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Commonwealth. Other scholars’ exploration of the subject was based on


6 M.V. Dovbyshchenko, Volyn’ska shliakhta u relihiynykh rukakh kintsia xv–xvii st. (Kyiv, 2008), pp. 18–19.

7 Ivan Sokolov, Otnoshenie protestantizma k Rossii v XVI i XVII vekakh (Moscow, 1880), pp. 245–450. Orest Levitskii, “Sotsniainstvo v Pol’she i Iugo-Zapadnoi Rossi,” Kievskiaia starina 2 (1882),