Nikolaos A. Chrissidis


Early modern Greek-Russian relations have long constituted a specific research area within the broader spectrum of the historical contacts between the two peoples and cultures. These were due not only to their common Orthodox Christian tradition, but also to the fact that numerous Greeks sought and found a safe refuge in Russia after the fall of the Byzantine Empire and the subjugation by the Ottomans. A major trend that developed later on related to the expected role of the Russians in liberating Greece and even reconstituting the Byzantine Empire. The chapter of the Greek diaspora in Russia is thus quite varied, intriguing and rich in material. It includes not only interesting incidents of a productive interaction between these two cultures, but also moments of tension and conflict, considering the Russian ambitions to undertake a leading role in the entire Orthodox world, lay exclusive claim to the Byzantine heritage and marginalize Greek influence.

The recent book by Nikolaos A. Chrissidis, a specialist in Greek-Russian relations at the time, is devoted to the examination of the fascinating story of the first formally organized educational institution in Russia, the Slavo-Greco-Latin Academy. This was established in 1685 in Moscow through the efforts of the wandering Greek brothers and hieromonks from the Ionian island of Kephallenia, Ioannikios (1633–1717) and Sophronios Leichoudes (1652–1730). Both came from an area never found under Ottoman rule and exposed to strong Italian influences due to a long Venetian rule. This explains why the two brothers had first studied in Italy and were especially influenced by Jesuit secondary and university curricula. This educational experience was later brought and adapted to the Russian cultural environment attempting to provide the Muscovite state and church with varied learned and skilled staff. This is evident from the textbooks (on Aristotelian logic, rhetoric, natural philosophy) and other material of instruction (on classical languages) that were used in the Academy between 1685 and 1694 under the Leichoudes’ leadership. It was in this way that Western Latin influences entered Russia in the 17th century, a quite innovative step considering the preceding Russian educational tradition. The Academy was thus instrumental in forging a new Russian political and cultural elite, whose members played a significant role later on in the overall Westernization program of Tsar Peter the Great. Inter alia, the various chapters of the book deal with the Greek-Russian relations and tensions in the 17th century and the various problems faced by the “Orthodox Commonwealth” at that
time; biographical data on the two brothers including their studies in Italy; the history of Russian education prior to the Academy’s foundation and the wider influence of Jesuit colleges in the Orthodox East; the rhetoric, philosophy and cosmology courses taught at the Academy and their Jesuit background; and the careers in both church and state positions of some graduates of the Academy who participated in Tsar Peter’s secularizing Westernizing project. It was thus a particular combination of religious and secular learning that the Leichoudes brothers enabled at their Academy, which was catalytic for the radical reforms undertaken on Russian soil a few years later.

Chrissidis’ book has many merits. It is the first thorough and detailed examination of this educational experiment in late 17th-century Russia and is based on an extensive use, appropriation and critical discussion of both archival and published sources (Greek, Latin, Russian and Church Slavonic), as well as of a rich secondary bibliography. Being a real trove of information, it also provides an in-depth analysis of the Academy’s organization, structure and impact on Russian education later on and contextualizes aptly the Greek-Russian relations at that time on the broader canvas of Russia’s increased relations with Western Europe. He also assesses appropriately and in balanced way the manifold contributions of the Leichoudian educational experiment, avoiding the pitfalls of earlier historiographical treatments of the Academy.

One of this book’s major contributions relates to the issue of the “Orthodox identity” of the Leichoudian experiment, given its predominant Jesuit prototypes and its attempt to combine theology and philosophy or faith and reason in a fresh way. This became a dominant model, also found elsewhere in the broader Orthodox East under Jesuit academic stimuli. Yet, the very issue of Western Latin influences upon the Orthodox East remains problematic in many respects because of the deep confessional boundaries between the two worlds. It was for this reason that such influences were often criticized as an adulteration of the genuine Orthodox tradition according to a prevailing interpretative scheme, initially formulated by the Russian Orthodox emigré theologian Georges Florovsky in his “pseudomorphosis” theory, and later developed further by other Orthodox theologians (p. 191; pp. 217–218, endnote 2). Can then the Leichoudian Academy be considered as truly Orthodox? Even in their lifetime, the Leichoudes brothers were accused by their opponents of professing crypto-Catholic views, a fact that also led to their removal from the Academy. In general, the above theological evaluation casts serious doubts on the Leichoudian Orthodoxy, yet from a historical perspective things appear to be different. Such interactions between East and West always existed and should be regarded as quite normal, despite confessional friction and the still existing boundaries between the two churches and worlds. In fact, they were productive