

Priscilla Hunt and Svetlana Kobets, eds., *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2011. 413 pp. \$34.95 (paperback).

No longer new, this book is still highly worth reviewing, and portions of it – particularly the translated sections – will warrant adopting for classroom use. *Holy Foolishness in Russia* surveys the topic, then dives deep, and finally demonstrates its continued relevance today, and features two excellent introductory essays from the co-editors, Priscilla Hunt and Svetlana Kobets, and contributions from top scholars across the globe. The apparatus includes abstracts in Russian of all save the introductory chapters, which will facilitate the use of this volume among non-native speakers of English. Assembling such an international group of experts gives the book gravitas – many are the foremost scholars of the topic – but in the end the volume suffers from an unevenness that makes it better to dip into or consult as needed than to read cover to cover. The illustrations are well-chosen and vividly reproduced.

Hunt and Kobets open *Holy Foolishness* with two essays, the first an introduction to the book itself and the second, “Lice in the Iron Cap: Holy Foolishness in Perspective,” a bibliographic overview of the topic. In her piece, Hunt explains the way the volume is organized, but she also makes the case that *Holy Foolishness* – along with the 2006 English translation of Sergei Ivanov’s book *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* – will give the Western reader the opportunity to explore just how, and how deeply, the Byzantium model “penetrated” Russia, becoming a “fully developed behavioral model” from the fifteenth century on (3). To understand Russia, Hunt argues, we must understand the role Orthodoxy and the holy fool paradigm play in Russian culture – indeed, she believes, holy foolishness is the key to Russia. It is that Byzantine connection which will induce me to reread and consult portions of the book.

Navigating the complexity of how these models interact with scriptural and/or Western Christian saints and models has now become more feasible, particularly with the close studies of specific holy fools presented in later chapters. Kobets reviews the scholarship on holy foolishness, taking Ewa Thompson to task for linking Russian holy foolishness to shamanism (in her 1987 *Understanding Russia*) rather than exploring its Christian religious roots and suggesting that Harriet Murav was too focused on the relationship of holy foolishness to mental illness in her *Holy Foolishness: Dostoevsky and the Poetics of Cultural Critique* (1992). This volume aims to take the place of those two works as the major access point for English speakers to holy foolishness, situating the concept squarely within its religious, medieval, textological, doctrinal, and behavioral contexts and showing the holy fool as eternally renewable and productive

for Russian cultural life. The first goal finds more success than the second, even though the latter idea is also convincing.

Essential to this task is the extensive translation published here of A.M. Panchenko's *Laughter as Spectacle*: "Holy Foolishness in Old Russia," "Holy Foolishness as Spectacle," and "Holy Foolishness as Social Protest." These three chapters, ably translated by Hunt, Kobets and Bethany Braley, first appeared in the 1984 volume *Smekh v drevnei Rusi* by D.S. Likhachev, Panchenko and N.V. Ponyrko and have long been inaccessible to non-Russian readers. It is no exaggeration to call these chapters the "seminal work on the phenomenology of holy foolishness," as Hunt does (6). Panchenko argues that *iurodstvo* occupies an "intermediate position between the world of laughter and religious culture" and presents holy foolishness as a "third world" of old Russian culture (41, 42). He focuses, among other things, on the intelligence of the religious holy fools he describes, emphasizing that holy foolishness is a voluntary behavior and does not reflect mental capacity. Taking the reader through many instances of famous holy fools, including hagiographic descriptions, parallels from folklore, and the paradoxes of their behaviors, Panchenko concludes that it became impossible to tell the "true" holy fool from the imitator, the "wise madman" from the "miserable idiot" (98). The final section of Panchenko's work describes how holy foolish behavior developed during the sixteenth and especially seventeenth century, as the power of the paradigm reached its zenith. Panchenko explores the link between the first and the last, between the tsar or empress and the holy fool, and the ways in which the *iurodivyi*'s "institutionalized form of social protest" eventually declined as Peter I came to power and began to pull Russia out of medieval times. These chapters, though dense and sometimes repetitive, will capture the Western reader.

Next, in answer to Panchenko's call to explore the concept of "antique spectacles" and their effect on the Russian holy foolish paradigm, Priscilla Hunt presents a lengthy study of the role of the fool in Byzantine sources – the seventh-century Vita of Symeon of Emesa and especially the tenth-century Vita of St. Andrew the Fool – exploring how core episodes from Andrew's life in particular entered into the Russian paradigm. Moving away from Panchenko's emphasis on carnival rituals, Hunt identifies the religious holiday of the Elevation of the Cross as "a modeling system for the Wisdom of [both] imperial and holy foolish spectacle" (165). Translation of the Vita of St. Andrew into Russian (partially in the 11th century and in full in the 12th), she argues, meant that the representation of "holy foolish spectacle as a para-liturgical act" that brings the fool into relation with the emperor and his Wisdom was available to form the model for Russian holy foolish tradition (202). Dense and highly detailed, this study might have unfolded into an entire volume of its own.