PAUL R. VALLIERE (New York, U.S.A.)

Modes of Social Action in Russian Orthodoxy: The Case of Father Petrov's Zateinik*

In Andrei Belyi's The Silver Dove there is a scene in which the idle and alcoholic priest of the village of Tzelebeevo, Father Vukol, is visited one day by a colleague from the neighboring village of Grachikha. As Father Vukol sat at home in his underwear catching flies, Father Nicholas, to the amazement of all who beheld the sight, pedalled up on a brand new bicycle. Belyi's narrator reports:

... the bicycle, let me testify, was an excellent one: a fine lad, the priest, to possess such a machine: a bicycle toy—new, accurate, with good brakes, excellent tires, and very successful handlebars! Hatless, the priest leapt from under his awning, wearing only his cassock, and jumped on the bicycle: that's the man he was: a pillar of dust on the highway: a small priest, like a mushroom! His spectacles slid to the tip of his nose (they were gold spectacles), his black hair in disorder, his cross swinging to one side, his black beard covering the handlebars, and his back arched... Well, well... Folk gaped at the priest as he scorched past them along the road on the bicycle gripping the handlebars, his cassock billowing like a sail and displaying, to the amusement of passersby, the pedalling motion of his boots with reddish leather uppers and striped bottoms.¹

The purpose of Father Nicholas' visit was no less extraordinary than his means of conveyance: to convince Father Vukol to be party to some sort of popular demonstration, the tendency of which is not quite clear (is it "red" or "black"?)? The agitation of Father Nicholas, however, evoked only a few words of caution from Father Vukol: "Don't go to peasant meetings and don't mix with riff-raff—live as others do and then you will not have to lament being soon unfrocked or becoming a political prisoner." And sure enough, shortly thereafter news reached Tzelebeevo that the good Father Nicholas "with a crowd of peasants armed with sticks and stakes, raised his honest Christian cross in his sacrilegious hand against the restraining authorities, and went on strike with the whole of Grachikha," for which pains he was ap-

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prehended by cossacks and led off hands bound. "There's a bicycle for you!" concludes our narrator.  

Belyi's portrait of the activist priest communicates a good deal of the irony, ambiguity, and awkwardness of the situation in which the Russian Orthodox Church found itself in the period of the 1905 revolution. The Church was being challenged to work out new modes of social action that could sustain its ministry in a rapidly changing social and political environment. Modernity, with its machines, was inexorably at work in Russia by 1905, and the Church had to come to terms with it or be bypassed or overwhelmed. The situation was in the last analysis not one of choice, but of force. In the struggle to come to terms with modernity, however, there was room for choice between different means and ends and even for new articulations of the Orthodox understanding of the Christian mission. New types of Christian social action could and did emerge, Belyi's activist priest being the representation of one of them. Father Nicholas was not content to let modernity pass him by as one more irrelevant and idle parish priest, nor did he simply recoil from it in terror. He intended to rise to its challenge by actually mounting it and steering it his way. Through his act of daring the Church would be as the pillar of cloud for Russia, leading the way through the wilderness to a promised land.

Father Nicholas' demise came swiftly. In real life the demise of some of the best known activist clerics of the period of 1905 came almost as quickly. Father Grigorii Petrov (b. 1867) and Archimandrite Mikhail (Pavel Semenov, b. 1874) were exiled to monasteries early in 1907 and subsequently defrocked, not to speak of the fate of Father Georgii Gapon (1870-1906). But it should not be thought that these priests were isolated individuals or that the only alternative to their relatively daring types of agitation was the lethargy of a Father Vukol. Christian social action actually became the central preoccupation of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1905 and remained so for several years thereafter. The announcement by the tsar of his willingness to see the convocation of a Council (Sobor) of the Russian Orthodox Church and the preparatory activities that ensued touched off an explosion of discussion in both the religious and secular press about the social and political role of the Orthodox Church. 3 The participation of the clergy in the political process of post 1905 Russia, including the election of priests to the Duma, intensified the interest of the Church in problems of social action. In the four theological academies, the institutions in which not only the scholars but many

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2. Ibid., pp. 198-99, 209-10.