

## Zuzanna Bogumił

**Karin Hyldal Christensen. *The Making of the New Martyrs of Russia: Soviet Repression in Orthodox Memory*. London: Routledge, 2017. xi + 234 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-78696-6.**

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Since the beginning of the 1990s the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has canonized nearly 2,000 new martyrs and confessors, Orthodox believers who were killed during the Soviet repressions (mostly between 1917 and 1941). Just during the Great Jubilee of 2000, which commemorated the birth of Christianity, the Russian Orthodox Church canonized more than 1,000 martyrs. This was the biggest canonization process in the history of the ROC. As a consequence, the profile of Russian saints has radically changed. During the first millennium of Russian Christianity (988–1988) the ROC had only 300 national saints, most of whom were primarily monastics, ascetics, or holy prelates. There were almost no martyrs during that time. Mass canonization has changed these numbers radically. At the moment, the majority of Russian saints are the new martyrs of the twentieth century. Karin Hyldal Christensen's book is the first comprehensive attempt to explain this new phenomenon within the ROC. The Danish researcher has written more than two hundred pages in an attempt to explain: Who are the new martyrs? Why did the ROC canonize them, and what did that process look like? She focuses on explaining how the new martyrs relate to the Orthodox tradition; however, she also tries to describe the contemporary social meaning of new martyrdom.

Christensen is not the first researcher to work on the new Russian martyrdom. There is already a huge amount of literature written by Orthodox believers. Most of these publications have a descriptive character and depict repressions in a particular eparchy, the lives and deaths of selected new martyrs, or the assembly of new martyrs. There are also published collections of primary documents, for example of the canonization commissions. Many of these publications are of low scientific quality, but others are very helpful for understanding the new martyrdom (e.g., Golovkova and Khailova 2012). It is also important to stress that an increasing number of analytical publications have appeared that are trying to explain some of the political (Rousselet 2007, 2015), religious (Semenenko-Basin 2009, 2010; Fomina 2013; Kormina 2013), social (Dorman 2010), and cultural (Fedor 2014) functions of the new martyrdom. Christensen refers to this literature; however, her main goal is to reconstruct the Orthodox memory of the new martyrs. Even though she refers to some memory theories, which she recalls in the introduction, her reflection on this field is

limited to the statement that “[t]radition represents the cultural memory of the Orthodox Church” (p. 11). The main goal of the publication is therefore to show to what extent new martyrdom is rooted in the Orthodox tradition and how it is innovating this tradition. Thus, a main point of reference for Christensen’s analysis is the literature on Orthodox Studies. The book itself presents an Orthodox religious perspective on the new martyrdom.

Christensen portrays the making of the new martyrs as a top-down process that was invented by the church leadership and spread downwards. The book is divided into three parts dedicated to three crucial processes for saint-making: canonization, iconization, and veneration. The main reference point for her analysis is the Orthodox tradition. Christensen begins each part with references to history, showing how these processes looked in the past. This overview permits her to analyze how a given process looks in case of the new martyrs. The book has no ambitions to be a comprehensive overview of new martyrdom, but it strives to begin the discussion around selected aspects of this phenomenon. Thus, the author’s strategy is to approach the problem from a general perspective and to move to a more detailed analysis. It is a very logical and convincing argument.

The first part, dedicated to canonization, begins with a brief presentation of how the canonization processes has looked since the first years of Christianity; however, it rapidly goes to concentrate on the specificity of the post-Soviet canonization process. Christensen states that the current interpretation of new martyrdom is rooted in the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution. Like other researchers (Semenenko-Basin 2010), she identifies this as a decision made by the ROC—to commemorate the victims of the Bolshevik religious persecutions as martyrs—after the execution of Father Ivan Kochurov. However, she only recalls the genealogy of the new martyrdom to concentrate on the memory activities of Hegumen Damaskin (Orlovskii), whom she presents as “one of the most influential conceptualizers of the new martyrs” (p. 34). Even if she distinguishes other memory actors, such as Metropolitan Iuvenalii of Krutitsk and Kolomna, Patriarch Aleksii II, Saint Tikhon University, or Metropolitan Tikhon Shevkunov, as active agents in the formation of the grand narrative of the new martyrs, Christensen argues that Hegumen Damaskin played a crucial role.

As Secretary of the Synodal Canonization Commission, Hegumen Damaskin participated in the development of criteria and “anti-criteria” for canonization. There are traditional principles used in the canonization process, but in the case of the new martyrs some additional criteria—“anti-criteria”—as Christensen calls them, were used. One of them was the “moral position” of the would-be saints during their interrogation. This anti-criteria became so important for the Synodal Canonization Commission that there were even some decanonizations provoked by the discovery of new documents showing that the accused changed their position during interrogation. As these anti-criteria provoked some discussion, Christensen reconstructs the arguments for and against that were raised by challengers and opponents. She persuades the reader that these discussions dealt with the core understanding of the nature of new martyrdom: whether the ROC accepts human weaknesses and purification as arguments for elevating a victim into martyrdom, or whether it only accepts a

martyr who sacrificed their life. Finally, Christensen shows that by controlling canonization the ROC is building its power as a political, religious, and historical agent.

The second part of the book, dedicated to the iconization process of the new martyrs, analyzes the way the traditional liturgical art and literature of the new martyrs are produced and how they complement each other. To make the analysis more comprehensible, a short summary of the context and meaning of liturgical art is provided. However, Christensen focuses on showing how much contemporary liturgical art differs from that of medieval times. Even if the return to tradition is a principle, contemporary hagiographers and icon painters may not ignore the existing broad spectrum of historical sources, which to a large extent determines the way new martyrs' icons and hagiographies are made. To visualize this Christiansen refers once again to Hegumen Damaskin and focuses on his compilation of hagiographies officially recognized by the ROC. She shows how much Damaskin's hagiographies are influenced by interrogation documents and that some dialogues appear practically unchanged. However, she also explains that this use of historical sources in writing hagiographies is in fact a return to the early Christian mode of *marturion*, abandoning the Old Russian *zhitiia* that for centuries determined the way a saint's life and death were constructed in Orthodox literature. Historical documents also influence iconography in the same way. Historical pictures are often used as prototypes of the new martyrs' icons. In consequence, the icons of the new martyrs are an interesting hybrid of the medieval style of liturgical painting and a modern understanding of iconography that is an effect of the twentieth century belief in the power of photography.

The last part of the book is dedicated to veneration. It is based on extensive field research conducted in the Butovo Polygon, located near Moscow. Christensen describes the creation of this important site of memory and analyzes its contemporary meaning. The polygon was used as an execution site during the Great Terror of 1937–1938. In the mid-1990s Butovo was transferred to the ROC. Since 330 new martyrs were killed and buried there, Butovo has become a significant site of the new martyrs' cult. Christensen analyzes it as both a graveyard filled with relics belonging to martyrs and a temple erected to their glory. According to Christensen, the Butovo temple is a result of the creativity of individual memory actors engaged in the formation of the site and of their individual understandings of who the new martyrs were. A very interesting element of this part of the text is Christensen's analysis focusing on the faces of the perpetrators presented in frescoes on church walls. She convinces the reader that even though they are anonymous, they are not dehumanized. According to her, they even express sorrow in a way that "invokes compassion for the perpetrators" (p. 204).

This reflection on the perpetrators' representation leads Christensen to conclude that new martyrdom is an important argument in the ROC's dialogue with the state. Moreover, she argues that, because since 2015 the state has started to develop its own interpretation of the repressive past (she mentions the adoption of the Concept of the State Policy of perpetuating the Memory of the Victims of Political Repressions), the ROC wants to become its main partner in the development of this

narrative. That is why Christensen agrees with other scholars that a “Soviet turn” (Kormina 2013) and “patriotic turn” (Rousselet 2015) are visible in the ROC’s approach to the past. She presumes that this will have an impact on the way that the new martyrdom narrative develops. However, she does not propose any scenarios for this development.

The book’s conclusions are very short and limited and leave the reader feeling unsatisfied. Christensen makes a very general summary of her analysis and her work only mentions the uses of new martyrdom in Russian contemporary politics without a deeper analysis. The conclusion is unconvincing; however, this does not depreciate the significance of the book.

New martyrdom is still a very fresh religious, social, cultural, and political phenomenon, which makes its analysis very difficult at this stage. A whole scientific apparatus is yet to be developed. Moreover, the situation is evolving and changing—what was true yesterday, today may be losing its power. However, Christensen has managed to free her analysis from the negative influence of the time her research was conducted. Her approach to the problem from the perspective of the Orthodox tradition shows that her research will have a lasting significance. First of all, it is a detailed record of a very particular moment in the formation of the new martyrdom dating from the beginning of the 1990s until the first decade of the twenty-first century. Secondly, her research is based on interviews conducted with people who were engaged in the process of canonization, iconization, and veneration. Some of these people are well known and interviews with them are easily accessible in the press, while others are not public people. Christensen’s records are the only sources presenting their opinions on the new martyrdom and revealing their role in the new martyrdom formation. This aspect is particularly important because the ROC has not properly archived this period of its activity and much information has simply disappeared. Finally, Christensen managed to talk to people who were the first hagiographers and painters. Liturgical texts and art produced by these people already serve as a reference point for subsequent generations. In such a way Christensen’s book has much historical significance. It describes the first stage of the new martyrdom formation and serves as an important reference point for further research on this phenomenon. Moreover, the book is well written and may be stimulating for anyone interested in Russian Orthodoxy and in Russian contemporary society more generally.

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