

*Kreuz und Kreml: Kleine Geschichte der orthodoxen Kirche in Russland*, by Thomas Bremer.  
Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder, 2007. 256 pages (€:19.90/ \$30.67).  
Reviewed by William R. Russell.

Thomas Bremer's impressive book offers both an accessible and fresh introduction to the history of the Orthodox Church in Russia.

Accessibility is a key to this "Short History." The structure of the book ushers non-specialists into its field of study. The opening chapters, therefore, move chronologically through major events in the history of the Orthodox Church in Russia (pages 21-142). In doing so, it sheds light on the requisite events and epochs of an introductory text—the missionary efforts of the Greek Orthodox Church and what became known as "the conversion of the Russians," the movement of the organizational center of the church from Kiev to Moscow, the evolution of church structure, church life under the Soviets, etc.

With the basic outline of the church's history in view, Bremer spends the rest of the book on topics and issues facing the church in the lands of the former Soviet Union—theology, monasticism, spirituality, ecumenical relationships (particularly with western churches), etc. This outline works well in an introductory volume designed to give readers access to the historical background of contemporary issues.

Bremer furthers the volume's accessibility with his straight-forward prose, as well as the various helps with which he supplements it. The charts, maps, and pronunciation guide offer practical tips for making one's way through the text. The *Addenda* (chronological table, select bibliography, and index of persons) give readers increased access to the subject at hand.

This book, however, is not simply accessible. It is also a fresh presentation of its subject. In the subtitle, Bremer indicates he is writing a "Short History of the Orthodox Church in Russia." This is important because, writes Bremer,

Western perceptions of Russia and especially Russian Christianity are often influenced by prejudice. The concept of "holy Russia" or a kind of "Russian soul," that is somehow imprinted with a particular kind of suffering (perhaps related to the Russian landscape), have too often characterized how western thinkers have viewed the church in Russia. Similarly, western interest in icons and forms of Russian spirituality has

led to a form of sentimentality that misinterprets important elements and developments of Russian church's history...

If investigators could free themselves from some of these pious myths about "Russia," says Bremer; they would be able to interpret the history of the church in Russia more fairly, particularly in the context of Russia's relationship to "Europe" or "the West." From its beginnings, the church of Russia has officially and self-consciously been a part of the Eastern Church. However, the church of Russia has developed against the backdrop of western Christianity. Further, it has, either by rejection or acceptance, been deeply influenced by western theologies and church forms.

This kind of influence is perhaps clearest, says Bremer, in the church's relationship to the larger community (e.g., the state). Orthodoxy in Russia would maintain that the west gave up old and important Christian principles in favor of individualism. In this view, the western concept of individual freedom in a rational and humanistic world view appears suspect, if not contradictory, to faith. "According to the Orthodox," writes Bremer, "[the individual] exists in the community that was realized as church community of the Orthodox. The Slav did not know individualism, he or she was a being in community. As such, this being did not give up its true destiny by entering into this community, but rather found it there..."

In a short, introductory work, authors make choices about what to include and what to exclude. Therefore, it is difficult to critique a book like this for what it did not do. Still, Bremer seems to identify "the West" and "the Western Church" simply with Roman Catholicism. At least since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, such an easy identification is difficult to maintain. More attention to western Protestant influences in Russian Orthodox history would have provided a helpful balance.

Similarly, given Russia's geographical size and location, together with contemporary dynamics on the world stage, Orthodoxy's interaction with world religions (particularly Judaism, Islam) deserves to be part of this story.

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