

Mitteilungen

Constantin Panchenko

The state of the studies of Middle Eastern Christianity in Russia in the late 20th – early 21st centuries

Since ancient times the Christian Orient, a community of Christian peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, played an important role in the history and culture of Russia. These two parts of the Eastern Christian world maintained close spiritual and intermittent political contacts. We can mention, for example, a long-termed Russian tradition of pilgrimages to the Palestinian holy places, widely reflected in the Russian literature.

Therefore, the interest of Russian scholars in the Christian cultures of the Middle East, Northern Africa, and the Caucasus is evident. The study of the Christian Orient in Russia has not only purely academic reasons, but is also important for the Russian self-identity because of the mutual cultural tradition of Eastern Christian nations.

The academic interest of Russians in the Christian Orient started in the 1840s and was directly linked with an active diplomatic, political and cultural penetration of the Russian Empire to the Middle East. First thorough Russian studies of Eastern Christianity were produced by Porfiriy Uspenskiy (1804–1885), the founder of the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Jerusalem, and Andrey Muraviev (1806–1874), the traveler, writer and church historian. During the next two generations Russian studies of the Christian Orient achieved the highest world standards owing to works of many eminent scholars such as Viktor Rozen (1849–1908), the central figure of Russian Arabic studies, Vasiliy Bolotov (1853–1900), who dealt with the history of early Christianity, Boris Turaev (1868–1920), an expert in Coptic and Ethiopian studies, Nikolay Marr (1864–1934), who specialized on Caucasian studies, Vasiliy Bartold (1869–1930), a specialist in Middle Eastern history. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century academic associations, institutions and periodicals devoted to the Christian East appeared in Russia. It is worth to mention in this respect the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society (founded in 1882). It was a powerful organization, which supported the Russian pilgrimage to the Holy Land,

protected the Arab Orthodox community and sponsored scientific studies on the Middle East. Another organization that deserves our special attention is the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople (1894–1914), which sent expeditions to the Balkans, Asia Minor and even Sinai and Transjordan. Academic journals like *Pravoslavniy Palestinskiy Sbornik* (Orthodox Palestinian Collection, 1881–1924), *Soobschenia Imperatorskogo Pravoslavnogo Palestinskogo Obschestva* (Reports of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, 1886–1916), *Hristianskiy Vostok* (Christian Orient, 1912–1922) published a substantial amount of material on the Christian Orient. A lot of historical sources on the Christian Orient were published in Russian translation long before the publication of their original versions or translations into other foreign languages were achieved. Rich collections of Oriental manuscripts were concentrated in Russia. One of the best collections of this kind, which united mostly Christian Arabic manuscripts, was presented to the Russian Tsar Nicholas II by Patriarch Gregorius Haddad of Antioch in 1913.

In the Soviet period, about the mid-1920s, studies of the Eastern Christianity were blocked because of ideological reasons. For example, the best Russian arabist Ignatiy Krachkovskiy (1883–1951) worked fruitfully in the field of the Christian Arabic literature at the beginning of his academic career. Anyhow, later on, in Soviet times, he had to leave this field. The only branch of studies on the Christian Orient which survived in the Soviet Union was related to Caucasian studies.

The revival of Byzantine and Middle Eastern studies in the Soviet Union started then at the end of the 1940s – beginning of the 1950s. The Russian Palestinian Society was reopened in 1951 and new issues of the journal *Palestinskiy Sbornik* became available to readers since 1954. During the 1950s and the 1960s studies of the Christian Orient were concentrated mainly at Leningrad's academic institutions and were led by Nina Pigulevskaya (1894–1970), an outstanding expert for Syriac studies. Among the achievements of Soviet scholars in the field of Eastern Christian studies were archeological excavations in Central Asia that discovered a wide Christian presence in this region in the Middle Ages and an extensive contribution of Soviet orientalists to Sabaeen studies.

During the post-Soviet period, i. e. in the course of the last 15 years, the conditions of Christian Orient studies in Russia have been contradictory. On the one hand, all ideological limitations and censorship regulations of the previous period have disappeared what immediately stimulated the increase of interest in the Christian East in the Russian society. The number of academic publications devoted to this subject grew distinctly. On the other hand, the general crisis of fundamental sciences in Russia, caused by the lack of financial

support of academic centers, hinders scholarly activity, especially the process of publication of research results. Nevertheless, one can observe a significant revival of the Christian Orient studies in modern Russia. Bearing in mind the diversity of the Eastern Christianity studies, it is nearly impossible to present an overall panorama of the research work carried out in the field. The main goal of this article is therefore to cover the progress and achievements of Arabic, Syriac and Coptic studies. Caucasian, Ethiopian and Central Asian studies are almost excluded from this review.

In present day Russia, there are several research centers and periodicals devoted to studies of the Christian Orient. Each of them has its own specificity and individuality. These specific features are often determined by the academic interests of particular influential scholars who head various groups of researchers. At the same time, almost every prominent scholar participates in the work of different academic centers.

The oldest Russian academic institution dealing with the Christian Orient is the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, which got back its original name in 1992 (so, the journal of the Society was renamed in *Pravoslavniy Palestinskiy Sbornik*). During the last years the Society made attempts to widen the area of its activity and, beside academic research, tries to restore several original functions of the Palestinian Society, like an organization of the Russian Orthodox pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the promotion of the dialogue of cultures. The Society has several regional centers in Russia. The most important among them are located in Moscow and St. Petersburg. These two groups work almost independently and publish their own parallel volumes of the *Pravoslavniy Palestinskiy Sbornik*, although with an united numbering.

One of the leading figures of the Moscow group of the Palestinian Society is Nikolay Lisovoy, a specialist in the field of Russian-Middle Eastern contacts in the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries and the early period of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society's history (before 1917). Accordingly, about 50% of the material in the Moscow issues of the *Pravoslavniy Palestinskiy Sbornik* is devoted to different episodes or persons, connected with the history of contacts between Russia and the Christian Orient, mainly in the mid-19th – early 20th centuries.¹ Russian archives, especially the Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire and the Russian State Historical Archive, preserve a great scope of non-studied information about this period.

Conferences of the Palestinian Society, organized during the last decade,

¹ The last Moscow issues of *Pravoslavniy Palestinskiy Sbornik* are volumes 31 (94), Moscow, 1992, and 100 (37), Moscow, 2003. Among the publications of members of the Society it is worth mentioning the monograph of N. Lisovoy, *Rossiia v Sviatii Zemle: dokumenty i materialy* (Russia in the Holy Land: Documents and materials). Vols. 1-2, Moscow, 2000.

were dedicated to the following subjects: the centenary of the death of archimandrite Antonin Kapustin, a prominent scholar and clergyman and in 1865–1894 the prior of the Russian Ecclesiastic Mission in Jerusalem (1994); the hundred and fifteenth anniversary of the foundation of the Russian Mission in Jerusalem (1997); an international symposium on *Russia and the Orthodox of the Orient* (Lebanon, 1997); the centenary of the death of Vasiliy Hitrovo, the founder of the Palestinian Society (2003), a conference in memory of the two hundredth anniversary of Porfiriy Uspenskiy (2004).

The sphere of interests of the St. Petersburg group of the Society is closer to the original character of the journal *Palestinskiy Sbornik* of the 1950s and the 1960s in particular and to the traditional branches of Middle Eastern studies, typical for the St. Petersburg orientalist school, in general. They include philology and history of the ancient and medieval Orient – Biblical, Syriac, Coptic, Byzantine and Sabaean studies. Among the most noticeable members of the St. Petersburg group of the Palestinian Society are Mikhail Piotrovskiy, the director of the State Hermitage, and the secretary of the Society Elena Meshcherskaya.² In 2000 the St. Petersburg section of the Palestinian Society together with the St. Petersburg Ecclesiastical Academy and the State Hermitage organized an impressive conference dedicated to the centenary of the death of Vasiliy Bolotov. Papers presented at the conference were concerned with early Christianity, the history of the Oriental Churches (Ethiopian, Armenian, East-Syrian, Coptic) as well as the historiography of Byzantium and Middle Eastern Christianity.³

2 Among the last publications of the St. Petersburg group of the Palestinian Society are articles in the journal *Pravoslavniy Palestinskiy Sbornik*, vol. 32 (95), St. Petersburg, 1993 and vol. 35 (97), St. Petersburg, 1998 as well as books: A. V. Paykova (1932–1984), *Legendi i skazaniya v pamiatnikakh siriyskoy agiografii* (Legends and tales in Syriac hagiographic literature), Leningrad, 1990; E. N. Meshcherskaya, *Apokrificheskiye deyaniya apostolov. Novozavetniye apokrifi v Siriyskoy literature* (New Testament apocrypha in Syriac literature), Moscow, 1997; A. G. Grushevoy, *Nessanskiye papirusi: Osnovniye problemi sotsialno-ekonomicheskoy i politicheskoy istorii Yujnoy Palestini IV–VII v. Sinayskiye nabateyskiye nadpisi kak istoricheskiy istochnik* (The Nessana Papyri: The main problems of the social, economic and political history of Southern Palestine from 4th to 7th c. Sinai Nabatean inscriptions as a historical source), St. Petersburg, 1998; E. K. Piotrovskaya, *Vizantiyskiye hroniki IX veka i ih otrazheniye v pamiatnikakh slaviano-russkoy pismennosti* (“Letopisets vskore” patriarcha Nikifora) (Byzantine chronicles of the 9th century and their influence on the Slavonic-Russian literature), St. Petersburg, 1998; A. Y. Borisov (1903–1942), *Materiali i issledovaniya po istorii neoplatonizma na sredne-vekovom Vostoke* (Studies on the history of Neoplatonism in the Medieval Orient), St. Petersburg, 2002; A. D. Pritula, *Hristianstvo i persidskaya knijnost’ XIII–XVII v.* (Christianity and the Persian Literature from 13th to 17th c.), St. Petersburg, 2004. All above mentioned monographs, with the exception of that by E. Meshcherskaya, were published in the framework of *Pravoslavniy Palestinskiy Sbornik* as vols. 30 (93), 33 (96), 34 (97), 99 (36), 101 (38).

3 *Istoriya Drevney Tserkvi v nauchnih traditsiyah XX veka* (A history of the ancient Church in the academic studies of the 20th century). St. Petersburg, 2000.

During the last years a new platform for studies on the Christian East has emerged in Russia. It is the journal *Hristianskiy Vostok* (Christian Orient), which is trying to maintain traditions of a periodical of the same name published at the beginning of the 20th century. It deals primarily with the philology and literatures of the Middle Eastern Christians – Syrians, Copts, Caucasian and Ethiopian peoples. The most productive authors of the journal were so far S. B. Tchernetsov (1943-2005) (Ethiopian studies), S. A. Frantsuzov (Arabic and Sabaeen studies), and V. Muraviev (Byzantine and Middle Eastern philologies).⁴ The majority of the authors of the *Hristianskiy Vostok* are scholars from St. Petersburg. Besides them orientalists from Moscow and other academic centers of Russia and the post-Soviet states, especially Armenia and Georgia, are represented. At the same time, the journal tries to develop wide international contacts and actively publishes articles of European scholars in English, French and German.

One of the most notable directions of current research in Russia is the study of the history of contacts between Russia and the Christian peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean region in the post-Byzantine period. These contacts are reflected in a great number of documents of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. This valuable information about different aspects of cross-cultural interactions and the history of the various Greek Orthodox peoples is kept in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts and other archives. For decades these problems have been studied by Boris Fonkich, the author of several monographs and many articles⁵ and head of the research center *Paleography, Codicology, Diplo-*

4 The first, preliminary volume of the journal was named *Traditsii i nasledie Hristianskogo Vostoka* (Traditions and heritage of the Christian Orient), Moscow, 1996. Since then four issues of *Hristianskiy Vostok* appeared (under the chief-editorship of M. Piotrovskiy): vol. 1 (7), St. Petersburg, 1999; vol. 2 (8), St. Petersburg, 2001; vol. 3 (9), St. Petersburg, 2002; vol. 4 (10), Moscow, 2006. It is worth to mention among the most noticeable contributions to the journal the following articles: S. Chernetsov, *Riches and Honor of Ethiopian Kings* (vol. 2), S. Frantsuzov, "Chto znachit imya?" (O proisхоjdenii i znachenii imeni Abraha: razrusheniye stereotipa) ("What's in a name?" [On the origin and meaning of the name Abraha: Refutation of a stereotype]) (vol. 2), *Materiali k izucheniyu agiograficheskogo dosie apostola Andrey a* (Materials for the hagiographic dossier of the Apostle Andrew) (vol. 3).

5 See for example B. Fonkich, *Ierusalimskiy patriarh Dosifey i ego rukopisi v Moskve* (The Patriarch of Jerusalem Dositheus and his manuscripts in Moscow), in *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* (Byzantine Chronicle), vol. 29, 1969; *Grechesko-Russkiye kulturniye svyazi v XV-XVII v. (Grecheskiye rukopisi v Rossii)* (Greek-Russian Cultural Contacts from 15th to 17th c. [Greek manuscripts in Russia]), Moscow, 1977; *Grechesko-Russkiye svyazi ser. XVI - nach. XVIII v. / Grecheskiye dokumenty moskovskikh hranilishch. Katalog vystavki*. (Russian-Greek contacts from the mid. 16th until the early 18th c. / Greek documents from collections in Moscow. Exhibition Catalogue). Moscow, 1991; *Greko-slavianskaya shkola na moskovskom Pechatnom Dvore v 80-h godakh XVII v.* (The Greek-Slavonic school at the Moscow Pechatny Dvor in the 1680s), in *Ocherki Feodalnoy Rossii* (Studies of feudal Russia), vol. 3, 1999.

matica at the Institute for World History. B. Fonkich is the editor of the new periodical *Rossiya i Hristianskiy Vostok* (Russia and the Christian Orient)⁶, which unites efforts of different scholars, dealing with the subject of the dialogue of Christian Orthodox cultures. The journal pays special attention to the study of historical sources and other specific historical disciplines, like paleography, and published a lot of unknown archival material. The center *Paleography, Codicology, Diplomatica* started to organize regular conferences devoted to contacts between Eastern European and Mediterranean peoples during the Ottoman times.⁷ The main topic of the articles published in the journal *Rossiya i Hristianskiy Vostok* is the Russian-Greek relations from the 15th until the 18th centuries. Beside this the journal pays also a certain attention to Middle Eastern issues. Christian Arabic philology is a sphere of interest of Dmitriy Morozov, one of the best Russian experts in Arabic paleography.⁸

The Christian Orient is furthermore a subject of studies at the Golenishev Egyptology Center (belonging to the Russian State University for Humanities) headed by Eleonora Kormisheva. Interests of the center include, besides the archaeology of Pharaonic Egypt, early Medieval Christian cultures of North-Eastern Africa and the influence of the ancient Egyptian culture on the genesis and development of Christianity.⁹

Among the new Russian centers for studies on Eastern Christianity is the Department for Eastern Christian Philology, founded in 1994 within the philological faculty of the Sviato-Tikhonovskiy Orthodox Theologian Institute (since 2005 – The Orthodox Sviato-Tikhonovskiy University for Humanities). This department, headed by the priest Oleg Davidenkov, trains experts in the field of Christian Oriental studies of different specializations: Coptic, Georgian, Northern Semitic, Arabic and Ethiopian. Annual theological conferences of

6 Vol. 1, Moscow, 1997; vols. 2-3, Moscow, 2004.

7 «Annual readings in memory of Prof. Nikolay Kapterev», organized in October 2003, 2004 and 2005. Nikolay Kapterev (1847-1918) was a pioneer of studies on Russian-Greek contacts in the Post-Byzantine period.

8 Among the most interesting publications of D. Morozov are *Arabskoye evangelie Daniila Apostola (K istorii pervoy arabskoy tipografii na Vostoke)* (The Arabic gospel of Daniel Apostol [From the history of the first Arabic printing house in the Middle East]), in *Arhiv Russkoy Istorii* (Archive of Russian history). Vol. 2. 1992; *Kratkiy katalog arabskikh rukopisey i dokumentov Rossiyskogo Gosudarstvennogo Arhiva Drevnih Actov* (A brief catalogue of Arabic manuscripts and documents of the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts). Moscow, 1996.

9 *Drevniy Egipt i Hristianstvo*. (Ancient Egypt and Christianity). Abstracts of a conference, devoted to the 2000th anniversary of Christianity. Moscow, 2000; *Kulturnoye nasledie Egipta i Hristianskiy Vostok* (The Egyptian cultural heritage and the Christian Orient). Moscow, 2002.

the institute¹⁰ include sections for theology and the Christian Orient, in the framework of which scholars discuss particular problems of Christian thought in the early Byzantine period as well as the literature and history of different Middle Eastern Christian ethnic groups from the late Roman period to the modern times. Conferences of the institute attract a wide range of scholars from Moscow, Petersburg and other academic centers of Russia as well as from foreign countries. In general, academic interests of the department are close to those of the journal *Hristianskiy Vostok*. Nevertheless, because of the religious character of the institute, theological themes predominate in publications of the institute's authors.

Among the different branches of Christian Oriental studies in Russia the Arabic studies were the most undeveloped and represented only by a few philological works.¹¹ Now researchers from the Institute of Asian and African Studies of Moscow State University make efforts to study the Arab Christian communities of the Ottoman empire from a historical point of view. They concentrate on the relations between Middle Eastern Christians and Ottoman authorities, social processes inside the Christian communities, the struggle of the different Christian Churches for the holy places in Palestine, the emergence of Catholic churches in the Middle East. Articles devoted to these problems are regularly published in the *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta, Seria 13: Vostokovednie* (Moscow University Historical Journal. Oriental Series). Furthermore several monographs on the topics mentioned above appeared in the last years.¹²

Besides the special periodicals explicitly devoted to Middle Eastern Christianity, studies of the Christian Orient are present as a marginal subject in some other academic journals for Byzantine and Oriental studies, like *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* (Byzantine Chronicle), *Vostok* (Orient) and *Peterburgskoye Vosto-*

10 The proceedings of the last conference were published under the title *Ejegovdnaya bogoslovskaya konferentsiya Pravoslavnogo Sviato-Tikhonovskogo Bogoslovskogo Instituta. Materiali* (Annual theological conference of the Sviato-Tikhonovskiy Theological Institute. Papers). Moscow, 2004. There is a project to divide the proceedings of the conference into several specialized periodicals, including one exclusively devoted to the Christian Orient.

11 One might mention works of D. Morozov (s. above n. 8) or the Catalogue of Arabic Christian manuscripts of the St. Petersburg branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, prepared by Nikolaj Serikoff, Vladimir Polosin (1944-2000), Valeriy Polosin and others (in print).

12 Constantin Panchenko, *Osmanskaya imperiya i sud'bi pravoslaviya na Arabskom Vostoke (XVI-nachalo XIX v.)* (The Ottoman empire and the Greek Orthodox community of the Arab East [16th to early 19th c.]). Moscow, 1998, and Taras Kobischanov, *Hristianskiye obshini v arabo-osmanskom mire (XVII – 1 tret' XIX v.)* (The Christian communities in the Ottoman Arab world [17th to the first third of 19th c.]). Moscow, 2003.

kovedeniye (Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg). Many authors are working on interdisciplinary topics analyzing Byzantine and Christian Arab history.¹³

In conclusion, one may say that all branches of Eastern Christian studies are actively continuing in Russia. During the last decade Moscow became the second, together with St. Petersburg, leading center of academic research in this field. Russian collections of Oriental manuscripts, rich archival funds, combined with the established academic traditions and the interest of the Russian society in the Christian Orient determine wide perspectives for the future development of studies of Eastern Christianity in Russia.

13 For example the work of the prominent St. Petersburg arabist Oleg Bolshakov, *Vizantiya i Halifat* (Byzantium and the Caliphate), in *Vizantiya meĭdu Vostokom i Zapadom* (Byzantium between East and West). St. Petersburg, 2001; cf. also the monograph of M. Krivov, *Vizantiya i Arabi v rannem srednevekovii* (Byzantium and the Arabs in the early Middle Ages). St. Petersburg, 2002, and many others.