

[Rimestad on Scarborough, 'Russia's Social Gospel: The Orthodox Pastoral Movement in Famine, War, and Revolution'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, December 14, 2022

Daniel Scarborough. *Russia's Social Gospel: The Orthodox Pastoral Movement in Famine, War, and Revolution*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022. 320 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), [ISBN](#)

[978-0-299-33720-9](#).



Reviewed by Sebastian Rimestad (University of Leipzig) **Published on** H-Russia (December, 2022)
Commissioned by Eva M. Stolberg (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58574>

In this volume, based on his PhD thesis from 2012, Daniel Scarborough offers a fascinating glimpse into an often overlooked discourse in Russian church history. Behind the title—*Russia's Social Gospel. The Orthodox Pastoral Movement in Famine, War, and Revolution*—lies the assumption that ecclesiastical institutions at the diocesan and national level on the one hand and local lived religion on the other cannot exhaustively characterize Russian religious developments in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Scarborough instead focuses on the level in between, the parish clergy, which has been a trend in American scholarship of Russian church history ever since Gregory Freeze's 1977 book, *The Russian Levites: Parish Clergy in 18th Century*. Freeze later expanded the approach with a book on the following century (*Parish Clergy in 19th-Century Russia*, 1983) and inspired some followers, such as Edward Roslof (*Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution 1905-1946*, 2002), Laurie Manchester (*Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia, and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia*, 2008), and Jennifer Hedda (*His Kingdom Come: Orthodox Pastoralism and Social Activism in Revolutionary Russia*, 2008). Daniel Scarborough fits neatly into this list with his book, which describes the way Russian parish clergy approached charitable activities and interacted with the secular world from the mid-nineteenth century onward.

As with the other proponents of this trend, Scarborough struggles with the difficulty of bringing the heterogeneous class of parish clergy and their activities over seven tumultuous decades into a neat and coherent narrative. He therefore limits the analysis to two dioceses, which seem especially fruitful for this endeavor: Moscow and Tver'. Moreover, the book is divided into seven thematic chapters that progress in a loosely chronological order. In fact, this is also the strategy of the other authors mentioned above. It makes for a good progression in the narrative but also makes the book less easy to navigate to find information on a specific time period or marginal topic. Then again, the well-structured index largely makes up for this difficulty.

The first chapter focuses on the changing role and self-understanding of Russian parish clergy across the nineteenth century, referring extensively to Gregory Freeze and Laurie Manchester but also a wide array of Russian scholarship on the topic. Especially following the wide-ranging reforms of the 1860s, the Russian state granted increasingly liberal rights of association to the parish clergy as a

means to retain their service as civil servants without paying salaries. However, the conservative turn in the Russian Empire from 1881, epitomized by the tenure of church ober-procurator Konstantin Pobedonostsev, ensured that these rights were monitored with suspicion. They nevertheless expanded and proved useful during the famines of 1891-92. Clerical networks and associations were able to coordinate famine relief across diocesan and estate boundaries more effectively than other societal groups.

Chapter 2 turns to the first attempts at revolution in 1905, during which the lack of a functional civil society in Russia decisively furthered radicalization tendencies—however, not among the parish clergy, where the established associations and networks exerted a moderating influence. While Pobedonostsev attempted to use the church to stop freedom of press and association, “by tasking the parish clergy with confronting the social traumas of modernization in order to curb these tendencies, [he] inadvertently empowered them to aspire to these freedoms to which he objected” (p. 63). The resignation of Pobedonostsev in the same year ushered in a will to reform church structures at the parish and infra-diocesan level.

The following two chapters cover the relationship between the church and education. First there is a chapter on the clergy seminaries in each diocese, which had become hotbeds of political dissent over the last decades of the nineteenth century. Then a chapter is devoted to the way parish clergy acted as educators—both in the parish schools and in general adult-education contexts. Both chapters detail how parish clergy used the seminaries and schools as means to exert influence over societal developments and as a way to collect and transfer money from one field to another. Importantly, this was seldom about enriching oneself but always about helping others, even if these others often were needy members of the clerical estate.

Chapter 5 covers the crisis of the parish structure after 1905. This crisis was not only caused by urbanization but also by the inability to reform parish structures at the institutional level. Many members of the parish clergy were eager to do more charitable work, but the outdated structures at the parish level hindered many activities, which often had to be carried out under the guise of sobriety societies. At the same time, the laity became increasingly assertive and demanded to partake in parish administration, which also could not officially be honored in the existing structures. World War I then dealt the final blow to ecclesiastical cohesion in Russia, as the priorities of clergy and laity could hardly be reconciled.

The penultimate chapter characterizes the role played by the increasing number of politically active parish clergymen. It highlights the continuous increase of clerical Duma members between 1906 and 1914, along with the church leadership’s largely successful attempts to push this constituency to the conservative right. Unfortunately, this policy resulted in a rise in anticlericalism, since the overall political mood among the parishioners tended toward the left. Moreover, while the parish clergy was generally sympathetic to leftist causes, the institutional church thwarted these political ambitions, contributing to a rift between the base and the leadership.

However, as Scarborough makes abundantly clear in the final chapter, devoted to the church during the revolutionary year of 1917, this rift did not suffice to tear the church apart. The limited civil-society experience of the parish clergy enabled them to act as moderators between the base and the top, as evidenced by the diocesan councils taking place over this year and the preparations for the

Moscow Sobor starting in August. The remainder of the chapter, as well as the short conclusion, recounts subsequent events in Russian church history against the backdrop of all that was analyzed earlier. This casts the well-researched church development in the early Soviet Union in a novel light, bringing otherwise overlooked aspects to the fore.

Altogether, the book covers an important aspect of social and religious development in Russia on the threshold to modernity. It fills in the missing link that helps explain why the church did not simply fall apart at the end of tsarist Russia in 1917 but managed to survive, even through the disastrous first decades of Soviet rule. Scarborough has taken great pains to put the archival resources at his disposal into a coherent narrative that challenges both the conception of the late imperial Russian Orthodox Church as a monolithic entity and the inability of grassroots initiatives of the time to work toward true democratization. Unfortunately, these initiatives failed mainly because of the inertia of the institutional church. Scarborough's unearthing of these discourses may contribute to the reevaluation of late imperial Russian church history.

As mentioned in the beginning, the link between the various chapters is a bit strained at times. There are passages that feel redundant or overly detailed, but all in all, the book is a well-written analysis of the role of the parish clergy in pushing for church reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Russia. The source base and the secondary literature are extensive and thoroughly referenced, even though they are limited to the English and Russian languages. It is a niche topic but certainly a well-researched and broad approach that highlights fascinating aspects of Russian religious history.

Citation: Sebastian Rimestad. Review of Scarborough, Daniel, *Russia's Social Gospel: The Orthodox Pastoral Movement in Famine, War, and Revolution*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. December, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58574>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).