Book Review


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It is well known that peasants in early twentieth-century Russia were disaffected. But few books have demonstrated quite so poignantly as this one how many of them just wished their world would end. The new religious movement known as Inochentism began in May 1909 when the monk Ioan Levizor—better known as Inochentie of Balta—had a vision which inspired him to begin a highly successful preaching career. Balta became a popular pilgrimage site and Inochentie’s preaching involved mass public confessions, the exorcism of demons, screaming and trance states and warnings that the end of the world was nigh. Several of Inochentie’s superiors did not approve of his activities and despite support from local bishops he was exiled to Siberia in 1913. Many of his followers accompanied him to Siberia, where they hid in the forest and visited him at night. Inochentie died in 1917 but just before his death his followers built an extensive underground monastery near Balta known as “the Garden of Paradise” where they awaited the end of the world. Bolsheviks destroyed the monastery in 1920, murdering large numbers of its inhabitants. According to one oral tradition they also exhumed the body, which had remained intact and gave off a pleasant odour. Inochentie started breathing again just before the autopsy was about to start and his body was then taken up into heaven inside a pillar of fire. The movement continued once the territory passed under Romanian control and endured throughout the interwar period despite strong persecution.

Kapaló first encountered Inochentism while doing fieldwork in Moldova. He recorded a number of oral traditions and practices from practising Inochentists, but this book focuses much more heavily on the first half of the twentieth century than on contemporary Inochentism. Unlike much of Kapaló’s other work, this book is light on explicit discussions of theories and methods in fieldwork. Instead, Kapaló focuses on the production and interpretation of written texts and shows rather than tells how to use them. Kapaló recounts Inochentie’s biography in Chapter 1, but does so through a contrapuntal reading of a 1924 hagiography alongside a 1926 account written by a church historian. He reconstructs each author’s motives for writing as they did while all the time trying to discover what actually happened. Kapaló asks about Inochentist beliefs in Chapter 2, juxtaposing Inochentist...
texts with Inochentie’s official “Confession” and a textbook about the movement written by and for anti-sectarian missionaries working to combat the movement. By focusing particularly on icons and other visual sources, Kapaló highlights the tensions between the primarily oral and visual religious culture of the Inochentists and the written culture of the Russian Orthodox Church. Chapter 3 continues the theme of the interplay between Inochentism and Orthodoxy by examining some of the practices that distinguished Inochentists from the official church. Anti-sectarian missionaries saw the digging of holy wells, mass confession, psychological illness and ecstatic possession as evidence of how far Inochentists had strayed from the true faith, but Kapaló uses their descriptions of these practices to reconstruct what they might have meant to practitioners. He extends his analysis to a study of gender, demonstrating that Inochentist beliefs about “holy virgins” and the role of the Mother of God provided young women with novel avenues through which they could practise their religion; avenues which were deplored by the Orthodox Church. Once again, this is a study of the limits and possibilities of source analysis, illustrated by examples that bring the sources to the forefront of the analysis rather than by explicit reflections on method.

Kapaló consistently presents Inochentism as an expression of profound dissatisfaction with the official church, the state and with society at large. This becomes particularly clear once the narrative turns to interwar Romania and the Soviet Union in Chapters 4 to 7. The Romanian state saw Inochentism as a particularly dangerous foreign sect because it flourished in the same regions as Old Calendarism, another new religious movement that emerged in 1924 in protest against changes to the liturgical calendar that reminded people exactly how closely tied the church was to the state. Having escaped the Bolsheviks, Inochentists now faced a new wave of persecution from anti-sectarian missionaries and the gendarmerie. Romanian newspapers and police reports accused Inochentists of a range of bizarre beliefs and criminal practices including the deflowering of young girls in religious rituals. By reading newspaper articles alongside police reports, Kapaló is able to show how these stories began, were elaborated on and then disproved. In doing so he provides a valuable reminder that sources that look like objective police reports were often far from it.

If there is a criticism to be made of this book it is that Kapaló focuses too heavily on his object of study. The book represents the definitive monograph on Inochentism and is likely to retain that status for many years. But few readers are likely to pick it up because they are interested in Inochentism per se. Readers hoping to learn about late imperial Russia, interwar Romania or Eastern Orthodoxy will find those stories told only insofar as they impact on Inochentism and even then much knowledge is assumed. Similarly, readers seeking a textbook on source analysis will discover that the methodological reflections are implicit rather than explicit. Instead, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity* represents a sustained reflection on what Kapaló calls “liminal Orthodoxy”—ways of being Orthodox that push the boundaries of acceptability and demand a level of flexibility and tolerance from a major religious tradition towards believers who do not always fit its ideas about right belief and practice.