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Reception of George Fedotov's Concept of the Russian Religious Mind by Academic Community



Abstract. This research was conducted within the framework of a communicative approach to the exploration of the academic community. Reviews, which are published in specialized historical and theological journals, are considered a vital facet of scholarly communication. In this article, we analyze these reviews not only as a means to assess scientific innovations but also as tools for establishing certain norms within the realm of research activities. By examining the reviews of the book “Russian Religious Mind” penned by the renowned Russian émigré historian George Fedotov, we identify two distinct groups of reviewers: foreigners and Russian emigrants. We highlight both commonalities and differences in their approaches to evaluating Fedotov's concept. Almost all the reviews shared a consistent structure, encompassing references to the academic milieu in which the historian was nurtured, positioning him within the scholarly tradition, evaluating the precision and originality of his definition of the research subject and methodology, and assessing the comprehensiveness of the sources and literature employed. Furthermore, it becomes evident that a critique of Fedotov's concept was an inherent component of these reviews, ranging from minor critical observations and clarifications to complete dismissal. The majority of reviewers adhered closely to the positivist tenets of historical research, which, in turn, impeded their ability to fully grasp Fedotov's groundbreaking ideas, rooted in the development of the hermeneutic approach to the “subjective side of religion”. Additionally, political and religious factors exerted significant influence on the reviewers' assessments. Émigré scholars generally harbored unequivocally negative sentiments toward Soviet historiography, while foreign researchers displayed a more tolerant attitude, allowing them to compare Fedotov's assertions with the observations of his Soviet counterparts. Notably, the most vehement criticisms, questioning the legitimacy of Fedotov's concept, emanated from a Catholic Jesuit, revealing disparities in the interpretation of the dogmatic foundations of the Christian faith.

Key words: George P. Fedotov, Christianity, Russian religious mind, book reviews as sociomorphic instruments

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Рецепция концепции русской религиозности Г.П. Федотова академическим сообществом

Аннотация. Исследование осуществлено в рамках коммуникативного подхода к изучению академического сообщества. В качестве одного из средств научной коммуникации рассматриваются рецензии, опубликованные в специальных исторических и богословских журналах. Они анализируются в статье не только как форма оценки научных новинок, но и как инструмент утверждения определённых норм исследовательской деятельности. Изучая рецензии на книгу известного русского эмигрантского историка Георгия Федотова «Русская религиозность», автор выделяет две группы рецензентов – иностранцев и российских эмигрантов, показывает общие черты и отличия в их подходе к оценке его концепции. Практически для всех обзоров была характерна единая структура: указание на академическую среду, в которой сформировался историк, идентификация его позиции путём помещения его в исследовательскую традицию, характеристика точности и оригинальности определения им предмета исследования и метода, оценка полноты используемых источников и литературы. Наконец, обязательным элементом рецензий была критика концепции Федотова, которая варьировалась от незначительных замечаний и уточнений до её полного отрицания. Большинство рецензентов явно придерживалось позитивистских канонов исторического исследования, что мешало им уловить новые идеи Федотова, формулируемые им в развитие герменевтического подхода к «субъективной стороне религии». На оценки рецензен-

тов также влияли политические и религиозные факторы. Отношение к советской историографии эмигрантских учёных было однозначно негативным, тогда как у иностранных исследователей оно было более терпимым, что позволяло им сравнивать утверждения Федотова с наблюдениями его советских коллег. Наиболее резкие критические замечания, ставящие под сомнение правомерность концепции Федотова, принадлежали католику-иезуиту. В этом проявлялось различие в понимании догматических оснований христианской веры.

Ключевые слова: Г.П. Федотов, христианство, русская религиозность, рецензия как социоморфный инструмент

Introduction

George Fedotov's book, "Russian Religious Mind" [Fedotov, 1946], marked his final publication during his lifetime. The concept for this work emerged in the late 1930s during his visit to England, and it was penned while he resided in the United States, following his relocation from France at the onset of World War II. The writing and publication of this book were made possible through the moral and financial support of Boris Bakhmetieff, President of the Humanitarian Foundation, and his assistant Michael Karpovich [Pis'ma G.P., Fedotova, 2014]. In their correspondence, the study's objectives were refined, and the prospects for publication were determined. Initially, Fedotov had planned to produce a five-to-six-volume historical overview of Russian religiosity. However, under Bakhmetieff's influence, he agreed to a single-volume, comprehensive work. Eventually, he returned to the idea of a five-volume history, with the first volume focusing on the formation of Christianity during the Kiev period.

The book was composed in English, intended for an American readership. This choice was driven by the heightened interest in Russia's past, especially given its alliance with the United States during the fight against Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Moreover, its publication by the prestigious Harvard University Press in 1946 guaranteed substantial attention from reviewers. In this article, we will not only interpret the content of these reviews in the traditional manner customary to historiographical research but will also consider them from the novel perspective of reviews as a means of academic communication [Stepanov, 2016], which constitute the norms of research activities by their structure [Nicolaisen, 2002] and form the scholarly communication system. As Ivan Klimov astutely observed, "a review is a ritual genre imbued with not just content, but also sociomorphic (community-reproducing) significance" [Klimov, 2008, 116], offering opportunities for a more comprehensive characterization of the materials under scrutiny. Sources for this study were specialized periodicals dedicated to Slavic or religious studies, which were primarily directed towards the academic community.

The Foreign and Russian Émigré Reviewers

Most of the reviewers were experts in religious history with profound knowledge of Christianity and its Eastern Orthodox branch. Even a cursory overview of these foreign reviewers confirms this. English theologian Donald Atwater, a former Anglican who converted to Catholicism, was renowned for translating the works of Vladimir Solovyev and Nikolai Berdyaev into English. He authored the widely-read "Dictionary of the Saints", published by the prestigious "Penguin" publishing house, and specialized in liturgics. American priest Edward Hardy, a graduate of Columbia University with MA and PhD degrees, augmented by theological studies at the General Theological Seminary in New York, held master's and doctoral degrees in theology. At the time, he served as a professor of church history at the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University, engaged in the ecumenical movement, and became a member of the World Council of Churches in 1947. Robert Casey, a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School, obtained both a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of sacred theology degree. Following World War I, he earned a doctorate in divinity at Cambridge and served as a professor of the history and philosophy of religion at Cincinnati, as well as a professor of biblical literature and history at Brown University. During World War II, Casey developed a keen interest in Russian history, culminating in the publication of "Religion in Russia" in New York in 1946. Jesuit and hieromonk of the Catholic Church Joseph Ledit, originally from France but educated in the USA, journeyed to Russia in 1926. Subsequently, he graduated from the Pontifical Oriental Institute and played a pivotal role in establishing an anti-communist center at Russicum. During World

War II, he became one of the Catholic missionaries among Russian emigrants. American specialist in late medieval mysticism Ray Petry authored books on Christian eschatology and social thought, and he held a long-standing professorship at Duke University. Historian Matthew Spinka not only possessed knowledge of the church's position in the USSR and the Balkans but also authored several articles on figures such as Berdyaev and topics like the Chronicle of John Malala and Patriarch Nikon.

When summarizing the distinguishing characteristics of authors within the Russian émigré community, one can highlight their broad intellectual horizons and deep connection to Russian culture. This trait is exemplified by figures such as Karpovich, a Moscow University graduate who later taught Russian history and literature at Harvard University, Gleb Struve, an Oxford University alumnus and prominent literary critic who taught at the University of London before relocating to the University of California at Berkeley in 1947, and Nicholas Timashev, a sociologist and jurist who completed his studies at St. Petersburg University and later taught at both Harvard and Fordham Universities in the United States. Among émigré reviewers, Alexander Schmemmann, a budding scholar who earned his degree at the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris in 1945 and subsequently became a lecturer there, stands out. Additionally, Dr. Nadejda Gorodetzky, who authored a book exploring the portrayal of the humiliated Christ in Russian literature, contributes to this esteemed group.

Fedotov's Position within the Research Tradition

Crucial method reviewers employed to position the author within the research tradition was by aligning him with known predecessors. The most commonly cited predecessor was the renowned French historian Henri Brémond, who laid the foundation for the study of religious sentiment among the French populace. This reference served a dual purpose – it placed Fedotov within the context of global historiography and emphasized the unity of academic traditions across national schools of historiography, each adhering to similar research principles. This approach acknowledged the needs of the “implied reader” who had to navigate research primarily in European languages. However, it's worth noting that none of the reviewers mentioned the work of Soviet historians. Schmemmann, addressing the French readership, preferred to compare Fedotov's observations with those of the French historian Pierre Pascal, while Timashev compared Fedotov's insights with those of Belgian medieval historian Henri Piren. Karpovich, writing in Russian, positioned Fedotov between prominent pre-revolutionary Russian historians Pavel Milyukov and Evgeny Golubinsky, highlighting disagreements with him alongside recognition from other esteemed émigré scholars like George Vernadsky and Roman Jakobson.

While émigré reviewers typically shied away from citing Soviet historiography, foreign reviewers exhibited a more balanced approach. Reviewers like Ledit referenced both pre-revolutionary Russian scholars and Soviet-era researchers in their assessments. Casey, a somewhat critical reviewer, relied on recent Soviet research when evaluating Fedotov's propositions. Interestingly, Casey, categorizing Fedotov's book as part of the émigré literature that continued the “old and highly honorable tradition”, implied that the author lagged behind contemporary Soviet historical scholarship.

Estimation of the Research Subject and Methodology

This leads us to a fundamental aspect of the reviewers' evaluations: the novelty and originality of Fedotov's study, primarily determined by its subject matter. Fedotov's comprehensive treatment of this subject in his book facilitated their assessments. Most reviewers pointed out Fedotov's exploration of the “subjective side of religion”, expanding the scope of church history to encompass spiritual and cultural aspects. Others simply quoted this definition, while some listed the research topics covered. Hardy, in particular, offered a detailed and insightful interpretation of Fedotov's research subject. Hardy emphasized that Fedotov's study wasn't concerned with the external history of the church but delved into the quality of religion – what religious leaders taught and what clergy and laity aspired to practice. Hardy believed this approach, which focused on everyday people rather than bishops and theologians, allowed for a deeper understanding of the true strengths and weaknesses of religious forces. This, in Hardy's view, was a pivotal aspect of church history and contributed significantly to the perception of religion within social history.

In contrast to the discussion of the subject matter found in all reviews, the methodology employed in Fedotov's research was addressed by only a few reviewers. This was partially due to Fedotov outlining only the broad strokes of his methodological approach, centered on a "preliminary, clear-cut, provocative synthesis". He hadn't yet delved into a detailed analysis. Consequently, most reviewers focused on the interplay between analysis and synthesis, generally adopting a positivist perspective. They believed that theoretical generalizations should emerge from a thorough examination of factual material. Atwater, for instance, consistently expressed this notion by emphasizing how Fedotov combined previously analyzed evidence in his final section, summarizing religious significance, historical importance, ethical values, and other facets.

Hardy's attention to research technique naturally led him to a more precise understanding of research generalizations. He noted that Fedotov didn't provide a clear-cut thesis but offered partial generalizations based on his analysis. This approach, according to Hardy, was indicative of Fedotov's success in conveying the information contained within the sources, rather than imposing rigid theoretical constructs.

Overall, Hardy's review offered a profound insight into Fedotov's work, recognizing the depth and complexity of his methodology and the significance of his research subject. This aligned with the idea that research is a process of understanding that precedes the formulation of theories, a concept that was not fully appreciated by other reviewers.

Evaluation of the Historical Sources and Literature Exploited

In contrast to Hardy, many reviewers directed their attention not to the technique employed in studying historical sources but rather to the very foundation of sources used in Fedotov's book. The author explicitly stated at the outset that he did not have access to Soviet archives. Consequently, the characterization of the originality of his research as "introducing new sources into research circulation", a hallmark of positivist-minded historians, could not be applied. Instead, it was supplanted by the comprehensiveness of his source base. Petry's assertion that the author "exploits rich deposit of original sources" [Petry, 1947, 66] best encapsulated this perspective. Casey, while noting the author's "fresh and independent approach to the sources", criticized him for "dismissing cavalierly the evidence at our disposal" (though the specific evidence were not identified) and for focusing on the veneration of Mother Earth, which lacked direct evidence [Casey, 1949, 230]. The most informative portion of the book, according to Casey, revolved around the "ordinary Christian", particularly commendable due to the use of liturgical and didactic literature "almost wholly unknown to English readers".

This principle of comprehensiveness extended to the research literature as well. Struve identified only two omissions in the bibliography that completed the study – Gorodetzky's works on the portrayal of the humiliated Christ in Russian thought and literature, and André Mazon, who cast doubts on the authenticity of "The Tale of Igor's Campaign" [Struve, 1947, 109]. Gorodetzky herself appended an extensive list of Russian and foreign authors to Mazon's name [Gorodetzky, 1948, 613–614].

Critique of Fedotov's Concept

Another ubiquitous element in nearly all reviews was criticism, ranging from minor observations to disagreements on significant points, and even fundamental discord with the overall concept. While Struve noted several stylistic flaws and Spinka pointed out inaccuracies in the transliteration of certain Slavic names, many emigrant reviewers criticized Fedotov for offering a somewhat schematic representation of the nature of Christianity in Byzantium and underestimating its influence on ancient Russian religious culture [Schmemmann, n. d., 132; Gorodetzky, 1948, 613; Karpovich, 1947, 302–303]¹. Karpovich noted that Fedotov's assessment of the Russian Church's dependence on the Patriarch of Constantinople implied greater independence from princely power [Karpovich, 1947, 303], while Timashev clarified that the Byzantine ideal of the "symphony" of church and state did not materialize during the Kiev period when the church prevailed over the state, a viewpoint positively regarded by Fedotov [Timashev, 1947, 124]. Evidently, this issue resonated more with them than with foreign reviewers.

The most consistent critic of Fedotov's book was the Catholic Jesuit, Ledit. His review, in contrast to the concise publications of other reviewers, appeared rather

extensive, affording him the opportunity not only to provide detailed rebuttals but also to construct a well-structured argument. Initially, the review was highly laudatory and almost poetic: “A refreshing newness, a lightness of touch, a fine intellectual subtlety, that occasionally breaks out in brilliant flashes place this book among those which are willingly read” [Ledit, 1948, 181]. However, Ledit’s external admiration for Fedotov’s work waned as he erroneously branded Bremont a modernist, “for Abbé Bremont died as a Catholic priest in good standing” [Ibid.]. The reviewer believed that the Russian historian went much further than the French scholar, raising questions about his perception of the objectivity of revelation.

Expanding on his critical argument, Ledit presented a reconstruction of objective and subjective attitudes toward Divine revelation, which made it evident that the subjective stance was not only incorrect but also sinful. Consequently, a minor critique of inaccuracies in the characterization of a predecessor evolved into the basis for rejecting the overall methodological approach to the problem. Moreover, the accusation of modernism was attributed to Fedotov himself, citing the condemnation of professors at the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris by the Bishops’ Council in Sremski Karlovci.

Developing the notion of Fedotov’s modernism, the reviewer puzzled readers with questions regarding the extent to which the author deviated from traditional Orthodoxy. Ledit’s concern stemmed from Fedotov’s juxtaposition of the books of the Holy Scriptures (the Old and New Testaments). He pondered, “to what extent he believes that Scripture is the word of God. The seven ecumenical councils were the rule of faith in Orthodoxy. His remarks on Cyril of Alexandria and Leo the Great, on Chalcedon and Ephesus are bewildering to a traditional theologian” [Ledit, 1948, 182].

The mention of the timeframe of the Ecumenical Councils was deliberate, creating a framework in which to contest the synthesis of pagan and Byzantine principles in the ancient Russian perception of Christianity. This was countered with the idea of the initial unity of the Eastern and Western churches, with which Fedotov would likely agree. More crucially, it highlighted the greater significance of Western Catholic influence on ancient Rus’. Well-versed in Russian pre-revolutionary and Soviet historiography, Ledit argued this over several pages, citing “missing” facts and overlooked literature, at times overlooking the merit of his own arguments. The final passage of the review arguably demonstrated the Jesuit style: “Professor Fedotov does not see things that way. This does not keep us from deeply admiring his talent, his erudition, the brilliance of his mind – still held in shackles, we believe, by something that he has not faced as yet: what is it that keeps Orthodoxy and Catholicism apart?” [Ledit, 1948, 186]. Consequently, the Jesuit reviewer questioned not the author’s professional competence but rather his religious identity and, by extension, his capacity to provide a culturally and historically meaningful foundation for his believing Orthodox readers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, two main perspectives can be drawn from the analyzed reviews. Firstly, in line with conventional historiographic writings, it can be summarized as follows: the book by the renowned historian Fedotov in exile elicited enthusiastic responses from fellow historians, including both former compatriots and foreign scholars. The majority of them lauded the study’s outcomes, noting the original choice of subject, the appropriate methodology, the extensive use of diverse sources, and the author’s familiarity with the relevant research literature. Specific criticisms did not diminish the overall positive impression of the work, and disagreements on certain aspects remain topics of debate to this day. The lone review that challenged Fedotov’s research approach did not significantly alter the overwhelmingly positive reception, primarily because it was rooted in a different religious dogma, one long detached from Orthodoxy.

However, a different perspective can be derived from the reviews. Examining the reviews allowed for the identification of key elements that structured their content: the subject and research methodology, sources, and research literature. These components formed an integrated system, with criticism as the linchpin. The system’s foundational paradigm was the idea that the object of study – the past – exists independently of the subjective preferences of historians. They must employ a method appropriate to the cha-

characteristics of the segment of the past under their research scrutiny. The substantiation of the presented assertions and conclusions depended on the comprehensiveness of the sources utilized and the accuracy of their interpretation. The latter required familiarity with the research tradition reflected in the scholarly literature on the subject. Historical knowledge itself was depicted as an evolutionary process that accumulates verified and universal truths. This was considered cumulative and universal in nature. Adherence to this system, reinforced by constant repetition in reviews, impeded the recognition of a potentially innovative, albeit not always precisely articulated, approach to historical knowledge embedded in Fedotov's final book. Therefore, the reviews, while acknowledging the novelty of the study, preserved established theoretical and methodological ideas, hindering the emergence of a qualitatively new perspective on the past.

This predominantly positivist paradigm was complicated by national, political, and confessional differences implicit in the reviews. The latter were of utmost significance. Confessional affiliations inclined reviewers who emphasized them to express their perspectives overtly. While these reviewers rejected the principle of subjectivity in studying the history of religion, they paradoxically acknowledged the professional competence of the émigré historian and, consequently, the scholarly validity of his research.

¹ Recent scholar notes the same shortcomings [Routil, 2011, 251]. Anton A. Voitenko quite convincingly reveals the reasons for this attitude of Fedotov to "Byzantinism" [Voitenko, 2017, 53–64].

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