

**Robert Collis (2012). *The Petrine Instauration: Religion, Esotericism and Science at the Court of Peter the Great, 1689–1725*. Leiden, Boston: Brill. — 576 pages.**

It goes without saying that Robert Collis's new book, *The Petrine Instauration: Religion, Esotericism and Science at the Court of Peter the Great, 1689–1725*, will prove of particular interest to the Russian reader. This is due not just to its perennially popular theme, but also to Collis's careful and attentive approach to Russian history and culture, which would be a source of pride for any Russian researcher. But why specifically "the Petrine instauration"? Not reforms, not transformation, but instauration? Collis responds to this question in the first pages of the book, but then, after a detailed explanation of his aims, only returns to it again in the final chapter, which is dedicated to the personality of Peter himself.

The interesting peculiarity of the book is that Collis does not simply present historical facts and analyze concepts, but places at the center of his narrative images and ideas of individuals whose destinies are inextricably linked with the history of Russia, and whose deeds and ideas created the specific irreproducibility of the epoch, characterised not just by the stormy development of natural sciences and techniques, but by the unique synthesis of the apparently irrecon-

cilable fields of religion, science and esotericism. Among the figures portrayed we find: Quirinus Kuhlmann, a follower of Jacob Boehme and a proselytizer of the fifth "eternal kingdom"; his supporter Conrad (Kondrat, following the familiar tradition of interpreting names "in the Russian manner") Norderman; Jacob Bruce, a merchant from the German Quarter requiring no particular introduction, described, in Collis's words as "a scientific sorcerer at the court of Peter the Great"<sup>1</sup>; Robert Erskine, a follower of Paracelsus, a iatrochemist, chief physician of Peter I, and the first Russian court physician (transliterated into Russian as Robert Karlovich Erskin); Stefan Iavorsky, metropolitan of Ryazan' and Murom and incumbent of the Patriarchal See; and Feofan Prokopovich, archbishop of Pskov and an extraordinary and multifaceted religious thinker and philosopher. It would be possible to make this list much longer; enumerated here are only those individuals whose names are used to introduce different parts of the book. A separate part of the study is, as to be expected, devoted to

1. A title given to one of the chapters of Collis's study.

Peter himself, but in Collis's work the typical image of the tsar-innovator is seen from a different angle: Collis analyzes with care and detail not just the traditional aspects of Peter's "glorious deeds," but the role of religion and esotericism in the formation of Peter's ideas concerning scientific innovation.

Quirinus Kuhlmann, the Protestant mystic and staunch adherent of the ideas of Boehme, was known for his emotional sermons and poetic-philosophical tracts, which asserted the inevitability of the future Kingdom of God on Earth, in which a single ecumenical religion would rule and people would live as Adam and Eve did before the fall. Society would be governed by equality and justice, and the head of the church would be Christ himself. There would be no conflict, or segregation into the elite and the ordinary, the rich and the poor. The exceptionally erudite Kuhlmann, who was familiar with the compositions of Ramon Llull and Galileo, and who took great interest in the most varied branches of knowledge, even in his younger years corresponded with Athanasius Kircher and took part in academic discussions. Apart from these thinkers, Collis notes the influences of "proto-Pietist Johann Arndt and the mystical physician and alchemist Paracelsus" on Kuhlmann's ideas (p. 3).

It is understandable that such a complicated synthesis of academic, esoteric and religious ideas would be perceived ambiguously — to put it mildly — even in our far more tolerant time, and it is hardly unexpected that, upon his arrival in Moscow in 1689, Kuhlmann was confronted not just by followers and admirers — of which there were many in the German Quarter — but with opposition and malice. The ideas promulgated by Kuhlmann were met with hostility by the Orthodox hierarchy, as well as by strict Protestants. His fate, which has been presented in many works, including fiction, was never in doubt, and Kuhlmann's preaching was ended by a cruel sentence: in the same year, 1689, he and Norderman were burnt at the stake, with Kuhlmann's writings burnt as well.

Collis examines the practical activity of Bruce in detail, and compares his fate and career with the biographies of such famous scientists and mystical philosophers as Emmanuel Swedenborg, Johann Becher, and Johann Kunckel, noting their similar interests in the fields of mining, metallurgy and alchemy. Collis reminds us of the possibility that Swedenborg and Bruce were personally acquainted, and that they were able to communicate, in particular, at the Congress of Åland (1718–1719). Both figures

attended as part of their national delegations, and Swedenborg often liaised directly with the Russian group. Analyzing the religious ideas of Bruce, Collis notes that they are close to the Pietist “association of religion and science” in a great many ways (p. 3). Collis draws interesting conclusions that are based on historical facts as well as an analysis of books from Bruce’s library, a list of which is given in one of the appendices.

Another figure who was wholly representative of Peter I’s circle is Robert Erskine. This outstanding individual, who became, according to Collis, one of the tsar’s closest advisors, exercised a “significant influence on the formation of the great reformist project of the monarch” (p. 121). Collis notes that, in contrast to Bruce, Erskine did not gain a reputation as a practitioner of black magic among the populace, but his views on science and religion were in many ways similar. Even before his departure to Russia in 1704 he was seen as a respected and talented doctor and anatomist. In Erskine’s library there were a significant number of alchemical tracts, a list of which is also provided in Collis’s book. Among those whose works interested the chief physician are Hermes Trismegistus, Cornelius Agrippa, Robert Fludd, Albertus Magnus, Athanasius Kircher, Georgius

Agricola, Andreas Libavius, Ramon Llull, Marie Meurdrac, Paracelsus, Martin Ryland, Angelo Sala, Otto Tachenius, Basil Valentine and many other authors, famous and not-so-famous.

A separate section of the book is devoted to Stefan Iavorsky and Feofan Prokopovich, whom Collis describes as “Ukrainian clerics” (p. 211–356). Collis defines Iavorsky’s talents by employing the term *wordsmith*. Arriving in Moscow in 1700, Iavorsky, according to Collis, found himself in an “an extremely tense atmosphere, which, on the one hand was awash with reforming zeal, but on the other hand was seething with religious and political resentments” (p. 211–12). It was the cleric’s penmanship and oratorical flair, that attracted Peter’s attention, and Iavorsky, thanks to the support of the tsar, quickly reached the higher echelons of the church hierarchy. Iavorsky was incredibly well-educated, had accepted Orthodox-Catholic union, studied in Poland, and upon his return renounced union and became a prefect of the Kyiv-Mohyla Collegium (from 1701, Academy), where he taught rhetoric, poetics and philosophy. His interests, as is well-known, lay not just in theology and philosophy, but also in astrology; Iavorsky was profoundly acquainted with the works of the European astrologers and cited them in

his research. Furthermore, he remarked that he had transposed the signs of the Zodiac onto biblical personages; this could hardly be accepted unambiguously by the Uniates, or by the Orthodox Church. As a herald of Russia's great victories and providential role, a great orator and sharp analyst, able through symbols and signs to relate the events of his time to Biblical prophecies, Iavorsky was necessary to Peter I, whose role Iavorsky compared, in particular, to that of Moses.

Examining the views of another Ukrainian cleric, Feofan Prokopovich, Collis writes: "the so-called 'enlightened' outlook of Prokopovich actually rested on three theological and philosophical pillars: 1) Pietist Protestantism; 2) an Orthodox faith based on the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers and 3) an esoteric worldview that embraced eclectic elements of Aristotelianism, Christian Neo-Platonism and Hermeticism" (p. 272). The hermetic and, in particular, the alchemical interests of Prokopovich are clearly demonstrated by the books corresponding to this theme in his library, a list of which is provided by Collis as an appendix. In a list of 34 works we find authors such as Otto Tacheinius, Cornelius Agrippa, Robert Boyle, Athanasius Kircher, Daniel Sennert, and Ole Borch. According to Collis, the figure of

Prokopovich deserves wider examination, which, among other things, should take into account the influence of mystical Orthodoxy and esotericism on the formation of the worldview and ideas of this true supporter and ideologue of Petrine reform. The personality of the archbishop of Pskov was, undoubtedly, ambivalent, and he attracted the most extreme opinions, leading to very different evaluations of his role in the spread of ideas of Enlightenment and reform: while Soviet historians viewed him in a fundamentally positive light, he has also been seen in unambiguously negative terms and accused of anti-Orthodoxy, a judgement most clearly formulated by the famous Orthodox theologian Archpriest Georges Florovsky, who wrote: "Feofan Prokopovich [...] was a dreadful man. Even in his appearance there was something ominous" (Florovsky 2009: 122).

Having presented this detailed research of the religious, scientific and esoteric views of the brightest representatives of the Petrine circle, Collis closes his book with an analysis of the personality of Peter the Great. The author considers that without taking into account the religious motives and esoteric interests of the first Russian emperor, any portrayal of him might be one-sided and one-dimensional. Moreover, Collis emphasizes that the role of reli-

gion was central in the formation of Peter's reformatory convictions. All that the great reformer achieved was compared to the actions of the biblical King David, and even the tsar's contemporaries compared his military victories to the defeat of Goliath.

But it was not just military victories and administrative innovations that provided material for reform, and it is now time to return to the question of the "Petrine instauration." Collis suggests that the reformist mission of Peter I was seen by the tsar and his circle as a return to sources of ancient knowledge, which were accessible to people before the fall; Collis writes about the deeply conscious attempt within Peter's circle "to restore academic knowledge" (p. 358). This understanding seems strange to us, but in that epoch encapsulat-

ed a more natural interweaving of elements that we now call scientific, religious and esoteric.

Collis's work will certainly not be interpreted unequivocally: clearly problems of crisis and reform, conservatism and innovation, relations of church and state, science, religion and esotericism are extremely current, and arguments are still raging in our day. However, the ideas formulated by this impartial and attentive researcher will, most probably, prove of interest to many.

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## References

Florovsky, Georges. (2009). *Puti russkogo bogosloviia [The ways of Russian theology]*. Moscow: Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii.

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The resources of Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University of the Humanities have provided the basis for a number of studies devoted to various aspects of the twentieth-century history of the Russian

Orthodox Church (ROC).<sup>2</sup> One of the most important fields to attract the attention of researchers

2. See Bakonina 2014; Anashkin 2014; Efimov 2014; Kostriukov 2011.