

The Confrontation between “Josephites” and “Non-Possessors” as Ideological Wishful Thinking

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The alleged fight between monastic “possessors” and “non-possessors” in medieval Russia is a myth. This at last applies while the two famed founders of these movements were alive. The difference between the two types of monasticism is of ancient origin, and no one ever made a “battle” between the two types a part of the historical record. Russia is no exception.

The argument here is that there was no confrontation between St. Nil and St. Joseph nor could there be. Those two forms of monastic life have existed as long as the church had. St. Nil was under the guidance of St. Cyril monastery, a strongly “Josephite” institution. St. Nil has been called a “communist,” a founder of a “new religious movement” and the forebear of “Russian liberalism.” This is typical of western, liberal historiography: the assumption that history is one large machine that exists to generate them.

In the English language literature, it is even asserted that St. Nil supported heresy and sought a separation “between church and state.” They try to spin the distinction between the two forms of monasticism into a more familiar difference between “liberalism” and “conservatism” in medieval Russia. Just one example of this can be found in a Russian history text this writer chose from his shelf at random, *Russia: Tsarist and Communist*, by AG Mazour 1962.

This well known historian calls this rivalry a “sharp conflict.” He says that St. Nil is “an early champion of the separation of church and state.” He says that St. Joseph used “Calvinist logic to argue that wealth was itself a grace of God for which each member should be grateful and praise the Almighty” (Mazour, 44). He then goes on to say that St. Joseph insisted on a “strict execution of church services” and that St. Nil rejected the “great adorned houses of worship, insisting the heart was more important than the temple” (Mazour, 45).

More recently, Geoffrey Hoskings in his well known *Russia and the Russians: A History* (Harvard University Press, 2001) does say that the distinction might not have been as important as was once thought, but the rivalry existed over other issues (Hoskings, 104). The real fight was over the connection between “church and state” with St. Joseph advocating a “quasi-papal view of church-state relations” while St. Nil said the church should “avoid too close of an association” with the state. (Hoskings, 104-105).

These are two very well known, standard texts in Russian history, one from an earlier generation, one more recently. While Mazour, who has an impressive bibliography and was very influential at Stanford, his irresponsible and absurd views on this matter show that he knows not the first thing about monasticism or medieval Russia. To compensate, he takes what is unfamiliar and casts it in a way that moderns would understand: a morality play that has no relation to actual events or ideologies. Hoskings is more correct, but maintains the myth on other grounds. Hoskings does make the distinction between institutional wealth and the individual monk, but even that is rare. The literature knows no bounds in its enthusiasm. “Russian protestants,” “liberal reformers,” “anarchist progressives” and even more inflammatory words have been used

to describe St. Nil. None of this is remotely the case. It does show that these people should not be writing on Russia if they do not know even the most basic rudiments of one of Russia's essential institutions.

The fact is that St. Joseph's Illuminator was partly written by St. Nil. The rules of all Orthodox monasteries are all identical on personal property. There are no exceptions to this. All monastic rules reject the owning of any personal property. The monastery as an institution is not relevant to this. This property is not owned by monks as people, but a corporate body.

EV Romanenko writes:

Nilus of Sora and Joseph of Volokolamsk chose different forms of monastic life: Elder Nilus, the skete, while the abbot of Volokolamsk chose the coenobium. In accordance with this, they have chosen different systems of property ownership. There was no contradiction between them as both systems date back to the early history of Orthodox monasticism, which is reflected in the lives of ancient saints (Romanenko, 1986).

St. Joseph had nothing but praise for St. Nil, as his own house had plenty of coenobia on the grounds (as almost all monasteries had). The coenobia came first, while the skete was often for more advanced monks who wanted greater silence in their lives. The rule of St. Kornelii of Komel, a successor of St. Nil, used elements of both rules in his own house.

There is no distinction between the two forms of monastic life and their views on capital punishment. Monks of all types differed on that matter. Russia generally did not have the death penalty for much of its history. Elder Herman, one of St. Nil's teachers, held that heretics, under certain circumstances, should be executed. Lisov writes: "In other words, Vassian Patrikeyev and all so-called "non-possessor ideology" is nothing more than the spiritual and intellectual provocation from a beleaguered elite."

Nikolai Lysov states the following about the personal relationship between the two saints:

They had the finest relationship. St. Joseph of Volokolamsk sent to the St. Nil's skete his disciples. And the hand of the St. Nil – and this is a staggering truth – can be found in the oldest edition of the Illuminator of St. Joseph. . . . Some researchers are even ready to attribute the Illuminator to St. Nil rather than St. Joseph, at least the shorter, original version. One thing is clear: that contrary to popular notions, both monks were so close to each other in their doctrine and monastic life that St. Nil took Joseph's Illuminator "as his own book, copied, and distributed it to others.

As for monastic landholding in Russia, he continues:

Monastic peasants were under the spiritual care of the respective monastery that cared about their spiritual and a physical sustenance and saw to it that drinking, gambling and the like, that which ruins the peasant economy, was eradicated. . . . Unlike the noble estates, there was no arbitrariness under the monastics, no violence against women, which flourished in the estates of the nobility until the abolition of serfdom in 1861, there were no "landlord harems." Peasants are not sold, were not lost at cards, not exchanged (Lisov, 2008).

He cites a letter from Lermontov in 1841 where the famed historian says that monastic serfs were never sold for the interest of the house. The monks were equals of the serfs and worked beside them. There was no distinction in any respect except the monastic rule itself. There has been no Christian society that did not have monastic property as well as the skete. From England to Siberia, this has been the case.

Further, the distinction between the two schools was the result of later heretics such as Vassian Patrikeyev and others who were not members of the Orthodox church, used “landholding” as a means to attack the institution as a whole. This has been spun to refer to a battle between the coenobium and skete themselves, rather than a polemical attack from a non-Orthodox, disgraced nobleman like Vassian. As far as St. Nil is concerned, there is no evidence that he believed all monastic houses should sell off their lands.

Generally, it seems that about half of St. Joseph's Illuminator came from St. Nil. There is no evidence that St. Nil was at the 1503 synod, but Vassian spoke as if he had been given their authority. The legend of the “non-possessors” came from Patrikeyev and the old boyar class. The term “non-possessor” (*nestyazhatelstva*) was used for the first time at Vassian's trial in 1531.

In the 4th and 5th sections of the shorter Illuminator, a strict policy of non-possession is laid out for all St. Joseph's monks. Contrary to the traditional account, St. Nil was one of the most popular authors to copy and disseminate among monks at Volok. Dositheus Toporkov, Dionysius Zvenigorod, and Efimov the Abbott were enthusiastic promoters of St. Nil right at St. Joseph's monastery.

There was a later confrontation between those supporting landownership and peasant labor versus those that did not. St. Nil had nothing to do with these. JS Lurie states that the chronicler of Cyril-Belozersky monastery were not so much monastics, but those proud of their wealth and origin; the “non-possessors” were mostly clerks and nobles. They attempted to promote the view of the oligarchy as that of the “Transvolgan elders.” Vassian Patrikeyev spoke as if he were St. Nil. Patrikeyev created this “debate” as a means of weakening the monarchy. Monks in both the east and west have been the most consistent supporters of centralization and nationalization of culture in the context of the church. The “Response of the Elders of Cyril-Belozersky” were a court faction, not the views of St. Nil. It was not until the 19th century where the “liberal westernizers” created the “liberal St. Nil” for their own purposes.

One of these was the Ukrainian communalist Mykola Kostamarov. Apparently ignorant of Orthodox doctrine, he states that St. Joseph

wrote a very strict charter to his monastery, and in order to avoid accusations that monastics were involved in business and banking, ruled that all the control and punishment of monastic subjects did not take place in the monastery itself. Vassian writes: “despising the fear of God and his own salvation, he permits mercilessly tormenting and torturing those in debt to the monastery somewhere behind the walls before the gates! To execute peasants in the monastery is not a sin!” (Kostamarov, 1997: 359-372).

Somehow, Vassian's words became associated with that of St. Nil and the hesychast elders. Nothing remotely links the two in this respect. First, Joseph did not write a rule, he was, as all monasteries, commanded to take the rule of St. Sergius, itself from the Kiev Caves and ultimately, the Studion. Secondly, nothing in the rule or in any of St. Joseph's writings permits

these gross abuses. It was crude propaganda.

He then stretches this myth further to argue that St. Nil rejected the execution (or torture) of “heretics.” The problem is that, by this time, Patrikeyev was already part of the Strigolniki sect (or some variant). He places in St. Nil's mouth the idea that the relics of the major monasteries are false and that the heretics are “martyrs.” At the synod of 1503, Vassian gives the impression that the purpose of the skete “rule” was the rejection of luxury, as if the Spartan rule of the Studion accepted it. He says that Nil Sorsky demanded the secularization of all monastic properties. This was a cardinal point of the heretics, never that of St. Nil or the skete tradition in the Orthodox world. Nil held to no such views.

Kostomarov wrote:

Faithful to the basic views of his mentor Nil, Vassian wanted the original view of monastic piety that places no value in church singing, readings, services, troparia and the rest, but in the study of the divine prophets, evangelists, apostles and the works of the holy fathers that are consonant with the teaching of Christ (ibid).

The skete tradition had and used all the ritual of the Orthodox church without fail and without omission. It was just at a smaller scale. Vassian, already converted to the heretics, placed these words in the mouth of St. Nil so as to render the church similar to Puritan Protestantism. He even goes so far as to say the “fathers that are consonant” with the teachings of “Christ,” that is, his own. There is no reason to hold St. Nil would accept any of this, and every reason to hold that he rejected it.

Kostomarov then attributes the writings of Patrikeyev to St. Nil and states, in yet another error, that St. Nil wrote his own charter. In Nil's works, nothing of Patrikeyev's ideas can be found. The Sora sketes were dependencies of the White Lake house under the Studite rule. St. Nil performed the all night vigil according to the strict typikon several times a week. Icons and relives were venerated with all the strictness as elsewhere. The outward rule of the Studion was taken for granted. Hence, St. Nil dealt with the psychology of being a monk – there was no question as to the “strictness” of a rule: generally, skete dwellers were stricter than those in the coenobia.

The “rule” presented in this “Response” had nothing to do with monasticism. It was an apology for ideorhythm, a form of monastic life long condemned by the church. Nikolai Lisov reminds us that the rule of the skete is not separate from that of the main house. St. Nil knew this quite well from his stay on Athos. This was not a meaningful distinction there, but rather a difference in emphasis. In the main house as well as among the skete dwellers, property was completely forbidden. The distinction could not have been made by St. Nil, since it did not exist in monasticism at the time. Kostomarov then concludes “Since that time, Joseph became an avowed and implacable enemy of Nil.” This has already been shown to be false.

The original Charter of St. Sergius of Radonezh has not been preserved, but that is of no scholarly interest, since it was the rule of St. Joseph of Volokolamsk that we understand its content. No alterations were ever permitted until this very day. For the “non-possessors” to challenge St. Joseph, they were challenging both Sergius and Athos. The monastic idea at the time would have not understood this distinction. All monks were forbidden property. The only way for this to have become an issue is for it to derive from non-Orthodox and heretical sources. Patrikeyev spoke in the name of the “hermits” from his position at court. While legitimately condemning usury and compound interest, this was not a matter of church doctrine, but a deviation from it.

The Orthodox church always condemned anything above the minimal interest rate.

The issue of the persecution of heretics is a false one, since Vassian was one of their number. There is no reason to hold that Nil differed from Joseph in this respect or, even if he did, that it was connected to the nature of skete life. Vassian then rewrote the canons and presented them to Ivan III as “ancient doctrine.” Due to Patrikeyev's poor understanding of Orthodox doctrine, speaking for Nil betrays itself as a forgery. An Athonite monk was strict, liturgical and rule bound – condemning monastic estates would be to condemn all monasticism and Athos itself. This was the self-interest of the secularism of the oligarchy, rulers who always needed a strong church out of the way. Vassian rejected Christ's divinity, the sacraments and the New testament as a whole. He was a Judaizer along with Simon Budny, as was revealed in the synod of 1531. St. Maxim the Greek had nothing to do with these views.

Vassian was not condemned for being a “non-possessor” but for denial of the most basic truths of the faith. There was no debate between “Josephites” and “Transvolgans” as there was no debate between “monastics” and “humanists.” these are liberal ideological categories read back onto historical events modern, liberal historians do not have the vocabulary or experience to understand. AM Zamaleev in his *A Course of Russian Philosophy* writes: “Palamas was a zealous opponent of rationalizing theology. He indignantly spoke out against 'the Latin teacher,' Aquinas justification for them Aristotle's logic, which seemed to him a violation of the commandments of the Apostle Paul, the saints and the Spirit-bearing Fathers.” Never did he reject reason in theology, since his Triads are highly rational, dialectical expositions of these topics.

In 1986, Donald Ostrowski began worrying about the hard-and-fast ideological labels historians were placing on medieval Russian writers. None knew much about theology or monasticism, most were overtly hostile to it. Bothered by the contradictions in the story concocted by Kostomarov, he writes,

Zinovy argues that one can still be a *nestyazhatel'* (non-acquisitor) and follow *nestyazhaniye* (non-acquisition), while being in a monastery that accepts settlements (*derevni*) and villages (*sela*) as a result of charity, as did Feodosy Pechersky, Varlaam Khutynsky, Sergiy Radonezhsky, and Kirill Belozersky (Ostrowski, 1986: 360).

First, the use of the original Russian is pedantic and unnecessary. Second, this discovery, coming as late as 1986, proves without question that the historical establishment is writing on topics of which they know almost entirely nothing. The content of the sentence above seems to be a discovery to Dr. Ostrowski and yet, it is at the root of all monasticism, both eastern and western European. He cites four saints of towering authority in Russia that show there could never have been a debate on “monastic landholding.” There was no distinction here and both skete and cenobitic rules functioned parallels they always have. The implication that bothers the professor is that St. Nil was doing battle with these saints. It did not make sense since St. Nil never rejected monastic landholding as Joseph never rejected the sketes: sketes that were part of the Volog monastery from its foundation! Orthodox. The monastic saints above ruled over cenobitic houses that had sketes surrounding it as is the customary fact on Athos and elsewhere.

Never in the history of the Orthodox church was there a belief that one form of monasticism was superior to the other. Ostrowski writes:

To be sure, historians have exercised their ingenuity in locating Josephians and Non-possessors hiding behind every iconostasis. Whenever they see the terms 'nestyazhatel' and 'nestyazhaniye' in the sources, historians have tended to think that the reference is to monastic landholding (that is, unless Iosif or Daniil uses those terms). Almost every reference in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources to conflict among monks has been used to illustrate a struggle between Church parties. But the usual basis for identifying a prelate as a Josephian or Non-possessor is the monastery where he was tonsured; the absence of any collateral evidence for a prelate's Josephianism or Non-possessorship (or even evidence opposed to it) creates no problem for these historians.

This is astute, but it is bothersome that it needed to be uttered at all. "Ingenuity" was needed because liberal historians were struggling to find a "liberal" party that could have created a "reformation" in the Russian church. From there, there would be a "Russian tradition" of liberalism. This unenviable task was taken up by Paul Valliere in his "The Liberal Tradition in Russian Orthodox Theology." Citing Solovyev is wildly inappropriate, as if the vaguely Orthodox version of Plato and Hegel can be brought under the term "liberal." Liberalism, to the extent it derives from nominalism, democratic theory and capitalism, is the negation of all things Orthodox. There can't be a "liberal Orthodox" for the same reason there cannot be a "Catholic Orangeman."

To claim that the rejection of the Petrine synod is "liberal" shows a level of historical ignorance that I do not have the vocabulary to express. Peter, a westernizing and modernizing revolutionary, imposed this system on a prostrate and purged church in order to slowly destroy it. As Peter and his successors piled clerical bodies atop the rack in the name of progress, it was (to be vulgar) the "right wing" that demanded the destruction of this Protestant and statist system. All saints in the Russian church without exception demanded the dismantling of this system in the 19th century. Of course, other groups functioned freely in the Russian empire and all dynamic and "reform" movements were very strict dogmatically: Optina is just a single example. Citing Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky as a conservative is true as far as it goes, yet he was vehemently opposed to the synodal system.

It is almost ritualistic in the American literature to attack Konstantin Pobedonostsev. James Cunningham states: "He had been unyielding in his opposition to parliamentary forms of government, believing that they were the cause of the decadence of the West and that their introduction into Russia in any form would lead to corruption and disintegration (Cunningham, 1987: 7202). He believed no such thing. While he was opposed to liberal democracy, those were not the grounds. Pobedonostsev wrote.

By reflection on life we are convinced that for every man in the course of his spiritual development, the thing most precious and essential is to preserve inviolate the simple inborn feeling of humanity in his human relations, and to nourish truth and freedom in his spiritual conceptions and impulses. This is the impregnable fortress which guards and delivers the soul from the onslaught of rank, and from all artificial theories which corrupt insensibly the simple moral sentiment. However precious in some respects these forms and theories may be, when rooted in the soul they corrupt its simple and healthy conceptions and sensations, they confound the notions of truth and untruth, and destroy the roots

from which healthy men develop in relation to their fellow-creatures. This is the essential which so often we neglect when seduced by externals. How many men, how many institutions have been perverted in the course of a false development, for these rooted principles in our religious institutions are of all things the most precious. May God prevent them ever being destroyed by the untimely reformation of our Church (Reflections, 213).

Perhaps Cunningham assumes that his colleagues are so liberal that such an assertion as this alleged “fear” of a “revitalized church” will never be challenged. He writes, “[Pobed] had been unyielding in his opposition to parliamentary government believing they were the cause of decadence in the west and their introduction into Russia would lead to corruption and disintegration.” (Cunningham, 2005: 7202). Again, this sloppy reasoning and vague condemnations is not only factually false but intellectually lazy. The oberprocurator says no such thing. His views on parliamentary government are well known and exist in English.

This digression exists because the modern university cannot understand Orthodox monasticism. Professors are overwhelmingly urban, alienated, liberal parrots who live in fear that any stray word or gesture might be interpreted as vaguely “offensive” and lead to the destruction of his career. Compensating, they outdo each other in liberal militancy. Seeking the “liberal” Russia in the Orthodox church is contradictory and it has its roots in the mythos of Kostamarov.

Again Ostrowski writes:

The advantage of the hypothesis that I have presented here over the Church parties hypothesis is in the ability to explain such varied source testimony coherently. In the Church parties hypothesis we are forced to postulate a number of unnecessary abstractions to fill in the gaps in the source testimony. We have to account for how the Church, which had no secular power to speak of, was able to halt the State's secularization plans. We have to account for why the grand prince expected a Church Council (I 503) to agree to giving up the basis of the Church's wealth. We have to account for the nature of the potential alliance between the State and the Non-possessors when we have no reliable, contemporary source evidence about it. On the contrary, we have several centuries of tradition that argue against it. We have to explain away discrepancies in the relationship of texts. We have to account for why no State argument in favour of secularization seems to have appeared. And we have to resort to explanations based on 'horizontal' alliances and clashes of classes, when the weight of evidence indicates political struggles were probably fought out in terms of 'vertical' alliance networks (378)

It should always be kept in mind that there was never a dispute at any level between the two saints Joseph and Nil. It came later, between heretical sects and the state. The relations between the two were exceptionally cordial and loving. All monastic rules are non-possessor and all cenobitic monasteries have sketes outside the enclosure, his own monastery of St. Cyril chief among them. The very fact that the Sora monasteries were subject to that large, wealthy monastery should have ended this discussion years ago.

As always, American historians are a disaster on Russian topics. Secular, neurotic,

spoiled and alienated, they attempt to understand Russia from a western, urban, liberal point of view without any grasp of Orthodox doctrine. Trying to write on Old Russia from the neurotic, secular world of the ladder-climbing academic is absurd. It is the very negation of what scholarship is supposed to be. It is a parody.

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