

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MORMON STUDIES

Volume 4

2011

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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The *International Journal of Mormon Studies* is a European based internationally focused, peer-reviewed online and printed scholarly journal, which is committed to the promotion of interdisciplinary scholarship by publishing articles and reviews of current work in the field of Mormon studies. With high quality international contributors, the journal explores Mormon studies and its related subjects. In addition, *IJMS* provides those who submit manuscripts for publication with useful, timely feedback by making the review process constructive. To submit a manuscript or review, including book reviews please email them for consideration in the first instance to submissions@ijmsonline.org.

International Journal of Mormon Studies (Print) ISSN 1757-5532

International Journal of Mormon Studies (Online) ISSN 1757-5540

Published in the United Kingdom.

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<http://www.ijmsonline.org>

REVIEW – SVOBODA SOVESTI V ROSSII: ISTORICHESKII I
SOVREMENNYI ASPEKTY, VOL. 6

Reviewed by Jeffrey S. Hardy

E. N. Mel'nikova, O. G. Moiseenko, and M. I. Odintsov, eds., *Svoboda sovesti v Rossii: istoricheskii i sovremennyi aspekty*, Vol. 6. Moscow and St. Petersburg: Rossiiskoe ob'edinenie issledovatelei religii, 2008. Softcover.

This volume, like its predecessors in the Freedom of Conscience in Russia (*Svoboda sovesti v Rossii*) series, is a compendium of papers delivered at conferences organized or sponsored by the Russian Union of Researchers of Religion. With a production run of 1,000 copies, it is not widely available, especially outside of Russia, but this volume is of interest to the audience of the present journal for its inclusion of a series of articles devoted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The first several articles are devoted not to exploring the interactions of Mormonism with Russia, but seek rather to provide an introduction to the faith. Given the novelty of the LDS Church to Russia (and the young history of religious studies in the post-Soviet era), this is not surprising. In fact, these introductory articles are not doctrinal treatises by Russian religious scholars, but rather a somewhat eclectic mix of reprints and translations. Gordon B. Hinckley's "Four Cornerstones of Faith" and M. Russell Ballard's "The Miracle of the Holy Bible" begin the volume, followed by the entry on Joseph Smith from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* and Adam C. Olson's "Humanitarian Services Lifting Lives Worldwide."¹ Next come a brief first-hand

¹ Gordon B. Hinckley, 'Four Cornerstones of Faith', *Ensign*, 34 (February 2004), pp. 2-7; M. Russell Ballard, 'The Miracle of the Holy Bible', *Ensign*, 37 (May 2007), pp. 80-82; Richard L. Bushman and Dean C. Jessee, 'Smith, Joseph: The Prophet' in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 1331-39; and C. Olson's 'Humanitarian Services Lifting Lives Worldwide', *Ensign*, 34 (April 2004), pp. 75-76.

account by Ezra Taft Benson of visiting and preaching to a Baptist congregation in Moscow in 1959, and Charles Dickens' well-known "pick and flower of England" description of Mormon emigrants.² At the end of the section is a bibliography compiled by E. V. Nechiporova of Russian and English languages sources on the history and doctrine of the LDS Church. This is not a comprehensive reference list, but it does cite several recent publications in minor scholarly journals, popular magazines, and edited collections that were not previously known to the reviewer.

The first substantive article in the collection, and the only one to address historical rather than contemporary themes, explores the treatment of Mormonism in the Russian press prior to 1917. The author I. Ia. Kanterov describes in some detail several books and articles on the LDS Church that were widely read in pre-revolutionary Russian society, notably those by J. H. Beadle, L. A. Bertran, V. Vereshchagin, S. V. Solev'ev, and M. M. Kovalevskii, but also lesser-known tracts by Russian Orthodox authors such as S. V. Bulgakov and T. I. Butkevich, taking care to place these works within the then emerging field of sectarian studies. One interesting finding from his comparison of these works is that most credited persecution (and the ensuing sympathy felt by bystanders) as the primary reason behind the rapid growth of the Church. In conjunction with this, most foresaw a rapid disintegration of the Church once persecution ceased and Utah became integrated into broader society. In general, however, Kanterov's article is descriptive rather than analytical and is noticeably less comprehensive than S. A. Antonenko's chapter covering the same ground in his recent *Mormony v Rossii*.³

The next article, by T. A. Chemikosova, analyzes the LDS Church presence in Tatarstan, a semi-autonomous republic just west of the Ural Mountains. Drawing on both ethnographic field work (while posing as a potential convert) and extensive internet research, Chemikosova concludes that Mormonism is a typical "new religious organization" in Russia and credits its relative success in Russia to its ability to satisfy the psychological needs of its parishioners in terms of personal development, security, friendship, and status. Her characteriza-

² Charles Dickens, 'The Uncommercial Traveller', *All the Year Round*, 4 July 1863, pp. 444-49.

³ Sergei S. Antonenko, *Mormony v Rossii: put' dlinnoi v stoletie* (Moscow: Rodina, 2007), pp. 128-83.

tion of Mormon doctrine and organization gleaned from first-hand observation is far from precise, but her descriptions of worship services, a baptism ceremony, and other Church-related functions should nonetheless prove interesting to those who have never attended such meetings. Ultimately, the picture she paints of Mormons in Tatarstan is one of respect, understanding, and even sympathy for the persecution they sometimes face for their faith. In this regard she notes a wide gap between “actual” Mormons and “virtual” ones, the latter being a disfigured construct of primarily atheistic and Russian Orthodox anti-Mormon slander on the Russian language Internet. There is some online information on humanitarian aid provided by the LDS Church in Russia, but in general little is reliable, and much about LDS doctrines, worship services, organizational structure, and so forth is distorted. Yet Mormons are not alone in such treatment, the author ultimately concludes, which many other religious groups in Russia suffer as well.

The themes of missionary work and hostility toward non-traditional religions are also the subject of S. N. Antonenko’s article, provocatively titled, “Should One Fear the Missionary?” Antonenko finds that whereas the term “missionary” had a positive connotation in the late Imperial period, now it is primarily associated in the Russian consciousness with negative emotions and associations, including espionage and “ideological diversion.” Such suspicion is felt by virtually all groups proselytizing in Russia, but Mormonism is a particularly visible target for this type of ill will, which is ostensibly bent on protecting Russian culture from foreign subversion. Against this tendency, Antonenko provides a number of reasons why Mormon (and other) missionaries should be welcomed in Russia, including; 1) freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Russian constitution, 2) missionary activity is inherent in Christianity, 3) Mormon missionaries take pains to not disparage other faiths, and 4) they are volunteers who act through gentle persuasion, never compulsion. In the end, in fact, he argues for the continuation of missionary activity, arguing that American missionaries, having served in Russia, return to the United States and form a sort of “Russian cultural lobby” capable of promoting Russian interests abroad (p. 117).

The next article is actually a short interview conducted by Mikhail Sitnikov of the religion-themed internal portal www.credo.ru with V. A. Nechiporov, a longstanding LDS Church leader in Russia who is currently president of the Rostov Mission. Responding to generally

open-ended and what one might term softball questions, Nechiporov characterizes Mormons in general and in Russia specifically as sincere, respectful, eager to obtain education, and devoted to their families. He highlights the humanitarian aid provided by the LDS Church to all people, regardless of their religion or race, and places heavy emphasis throughout on faith as a motivator for good deeds.

The final article in this collection, by N. I. Pachezhertsev, examines the Mormon concept of eternal families and the specific practices that result from this doctrine. Though brief, there are a few interesting moments. In discussing baptism for the dead, for instance, Pachezhertsev cites Russian Orthodox commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:29 to demonstrate that such ordinances were likely a part of the Apostolic Church. And in conclusion, after reciting the comprehensive effort made by Mormons to create strong families, the author forecasts that the LDS Church will as a result become well established in Russia, albeit only after three generations from the time missionary began.

To sum up, the articles presented in Volume 6 of *Svoboda sovesti v Rossii* on Mormonism are uneven and deal more with contemporary rather than historical issues. They tend to be descriptive rather than analytical. Significantly, though, the selection of articles and the authors themselves exhibit an even-handedness bordering on sympathy that results in a positive portrayal of the LDS Church in general and in Russia in particular. For Russian religious scholars this volume is an attempt to understand Mormon doctrine, organization, and society unencumbered by the substantial body of anti-Mormon literature available in Russia. In this it is an admirable first step.

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