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Folly, Foolishness, Foolery*

In Eastern Orthodox Christianity the fool for Christ (Russ. *iurodivyi*, Greek *salos*) is both a canonical saint and a social pariah. While he is an ascetic, he prefers the city's commotion to the serenity of seclusion, constantly engaging his audiences in interactive shows, which shock them into the realization of vital truths about themselves, worldly existence and higher reality. It was this role of the *iurodivyi* that elevated him to the position of Russia's spiritual mentor and traditional commentator on social, political and spiritual matters. The prominence of the holy fool in Russian literature, history and culture puts him firmly on the agenda of Slavic studies scholarship.

Holy fools are not unique to Russia and have been observed, recorded and studied within Byzantine, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu and other world traditions. Therefore, the subject of holy foolery falls within the broader domain of Anthropology, History, Religious and Cultural Studies. Yet Russia, which has long made the *iurodivyi* one of its most recognizable national types, claims priority in exploring the holy fool's phenomenology in religion, culture and art. The ratio of Russian to Western studies of the history and phenomenology of *iurodstvo* is indeed rather revealing: while the latter amount to just a few monographs and articles, the former yield dozens of book-length studies and many more articles. In the last decade several books on Russian holy foolishness as well as several dissertations have appeared. There have also come out important reprints of nineteenth-century ethnographic¹ and theological² studies of the subject.³

Despite the number of works dedicated to holy foolery and especially to its cultural and literary applications, this subject has long remained understudied. Some works are flawed by ideological (I. G. Pryzhov), political (I. U. Budovnitz),⁴ or

* Review of Sergey A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*. Translated by Simon Franklin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

¹ I. G. Pryzhov, *26 moskovskikh prorokov, iurodivykh i durakov* (Reprint of 1865. St. Petersburg: Ezro, and Moscow: Intrada, 1996).

² I. Kovalevskii, *Iurodstvo o Khriste i Khrista radi iurodivye vostochnoi i russkoi tserkvi* (Moscow, 1902, 2nd ed. 1992).

³ For a comprehensive up to date bibliography of works on holy foolery see Sergey A. Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, translated by Simon Franklin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 415–456.

⁴ I. U. Budovnitz, "Iurodivye drevnei Rusi," in *Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma, XII* (Moskva: Nauka, 1964) 170–195.

religious (I. Kovalevskii) bias. Other studies offer superficial, uninformed⁵ readings of holy foolery and even misinterpret this phenomenon. For example, Ewa M. Thompson's monograph, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (1987),⁶ is based on the premise that holy foolishness is not an innately Christian phenomenon but a Russian transformation of Finnish shamanism. Examination of pagan aspects and folk versions of Russian holy foolery is certainly a productive field of research, yet Thompson ventures to discard the Christian significance of the phenomenon altogether. However, her study fails to substantiate her argument: Thompson's claim is based solely on circumstantial evidence and is not convincing.

For a long time Aleksandr Panchenko's 1978 *Smekh kak zrelishche* (Laughter as Spectacle)⁷ remained the most comprehensive study of the phenomenology and cultural meanings of Russian foolery for Christ. In 1994 the primacy of Panchenko's work was challenged by Sergei Ivanov's monograph, *Vizantiiskoe iurodstvo*, which for the first time presented the developmental history of holy foolery as a phenomenon, concept and hagiographic tradition. This work dramatically re-evaluated the field of study of holy foolery. Yet, it remained largely unknown in the West, where scholars often relied on non-Russian-language studies. In 2006, Ivanov's monograph finally became available to Western readership, albeit in a new, revised and expanded form, deservedly claiming the status of the most comprehensive study of Eastern Orthodox foolery in Christ to date.

The 2006 monograph, titled *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*, builds on its 1994 forerunner, but is a new study altogether. It has doubled in scope and size, with five new chapters and a new introduction, as well as an expanded bibliography. A year earlier, the Russian version of this study, titled *Blazhennye Pokhaby: Kul'turnaia istoriia iurodstva* (Blessed Fools: cultural history of foolery for Christ)⁸ was published. The divergence between the Russian and English titles is indicative of occasional dissimilarities between the Russian and English versions of the book, yet they largely overlap.

Translation of this book was certainly a demanding task: the Russian version features terms which do not have English equivalents (e.g. *iurodivyi*) and has a number of citations which were translated into Russian from several languages, including Ancient Greek, Latin, and Georgian. Was the translator a linguistic match of the polyglot author? Are his English translations based on the source citations? Or do they simply render their Russian versions? The reader remains to wonder as

⁵ See the section on Russian holy foolery in Elizabeth-Anne Stewart, *Jesus the Holy Fool* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 2000).

⁶ Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

⁷ A. M. Panchenko, "Smekh kak zrelishche," in *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi*, edited by D. S. Likhachev, A. M. Panchenko, and N. V. Ponyrko (Leningrad: Nauka, 1978).

⁸ S. A. Ivanov, *Blazhennye pokhaby: Kul'turnaia istoriia iurodstva* (Moskva: Iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2005.)

the translator does not initiate him/her into the challenges and pitfalls of his project. Indeed, translator's foreword or notes or any kind are missing.

Ivanov begins his study with a vast re-conceptualization of the English rendition of its key term, *iurodstvo*. He rejects the formerly accepted terms "holy folly" and "holy foolishness" in favour of a new one, holy foolery (p. v). The author admits that even the new term is not ideal; however, by implying deliberate, provocative behaviour which does not proceed from a person's silliness or madness, the term serves its purpose well. As Ivanov discusses this and other terms (*pokhab*, *blazhennyi*, *bui*) in their old and new uses, he comments on the semantic shifts in their meanings.

The first chapter, "Precursors and Emergence," largely repeats the content of the first two chapters of *Vizantiiskoe iurodstvo*. There, Ivanov gives a brief overview of cultural attitudes to and textualizations of "performative, culturally interpreted insanity" (p. 11) in the key cultures of the ancient world and discusses early Christian interpretations of "wisdom" and "foolishness." The scholar concludes this chapter by introducing the motif of secret sanctity—one of the key premises of holy foolery—which he further explores throughout his study in a number of contexts.

The second chapter, titled "Insane Saints," continues the analysis of the idiosyncratic interpretations of Christian piety by select ascetic authors and treats the monastic stage in the developmental history of foolery for Christ.

In the third chapter, "Lechers and Beggars," Ivanov addresses the problems and controversies posed by the issue of the ascetics' movement from hermetic or monastic seclusion to the city and demonstrates an array of innovative urban ascetic practices (feigned begging, consorting with prostitutes, social disruption and aggression). Unfortunately, it appears that the recent monograph of Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks* (2002)⁹, was unavailable to Ivanov. Caner's work extensively explores this topic in the Late Antique setting and has a number of relevant discussions, awareness of which would have enhanced Ivanov's study (e.g. the discussion of *girovagi*, the wandering monks of early Christianity).

Leonteos of Neapolis's vita of the first hagiographic urban holy fool, Simeon of Emesa, is briefly discussed in chapter four, *Holy Scandal*, devoted to urban, or, in Ivanov's words, "authentic, classic" holy foolery (p. 104). Ivanov underscores the great significance of Leonteos' work—"the first fully fledged 'holy foolish' vita" (p. 105)—which served as a model for the life of Andrew the Fool of Constantinople "and thence for all subsequent hagiography of holy foolery" (p. 105). Ivanov discusses possible sources (Arabic writings, folklore) and models (mime) instrumental to Leonteos' composition of Simeon's vita and refutes the

⁹ Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

recent analysis of Derek Krueger,¹⁰ who, in Ivanov's opinion, presents Simeon as a "Christian Diogenes" (p. 108). For Ivanov such an approach is unacceptable since he does not believe in the possibility of analysis of Simeon's image outside the cultural paradigm of holy foolery. Krueger's monograph, however, deserves much greater credit since it presents an important contribution to the study of this seminal life of a holy fool, and to a research area which bridges the Cynic movement and early Christianity.¹¹ Krueger's argument about the significance for Leonteos' work of Hellenistic legacy and, most importantly, of the textual legacy of the Cynic tradition, cannot be easily dismissed. As Ivanov stated earlier himself, the Cynic movement is a single most important Hellenistic cultural tradition for the emergence and phenomenological development of the paradigm of holy foolery.

The next chapter, "The 'Second Edition' of Holy Foolery," contemplates the revival of Byzantine holy foolery from the ninth to the eleventh centuries through the analysis of the life of Andrew the Fool of Constantinople as well as several previously unknown vitae. Ivanov suggests that the Byzantine fools for Christ, Simeon of Emesa, Isidora, Andrew of Constantinople and Alexis the Man of God, are purely literary creations and juxtaposes them with less scandalous, in fact, quite timid holy fools, whose hagiographic portrayals were based on real-life characters (e.g. St. Paul of Corinth, St. Grigentios). According to Ivanov, these lives testify to the decline in the hagiographic importance of notoriously socially marginal holy fools which took place at the same time as more normative socially oriented sanctity acquired importance. Under the influence of this social ideal of sanctity, the hagiographic model of the holy fool henceforth appears less wild and controversial, more decent, ascetic and pious.

In the seventh and eighth chapters, "Balancing at the Edge" and "Decline," Ivanov treats the issue of the decline of Byzantine foolery in Christ. In chapter seven he dwells on the dubious place of the holy fool in eleventh and twelfth-century Byzantium, arguing that it was during this period that the holy fool was often portrayed as a real madman or impostor, that issues of deviant ascetics,¹² fraud, and hypocrisy acquired great urgency in society, and that the number of hagiographic depictions of *saloi* dwindled (p. 215). Ivanov attributes the holy fool's loss of his former venerable place to the overall tenth-century decline of the social status of asceticism (pp. 215–216). In chapter eight, he turns to the culminating centuries of the fifteen-hundred-year path of Byzantine holy foolery. While it was still embraced by monastic communities—Ivanov posits that late holy foolery was closely linked to Mt. Athos and especially to the Hilander monastery—its practitioners were not "officially" regarded as holy fools.

¹⁰ Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leonius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹¹ See, for example, F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

¹² That is, wondering monks, beggars, holy fools, and sectarians.

The next five chapters, which are devoted to Russian holy foolery, feature groundbreaking original research and a great variety of topics. Ivanov fundamentally re-evaluates the previous understanding of the history of the initial stage of urban Russian foolery for Christ. He states that the Russian tradition of urban holy foolery starts not with Prokopii of Ustiug but with Isidor Tverdislov (d. 1474 or 1484) and convincingly substantiates his claim. Ivanov shows how Isidor's life served as a matrix that continuously supplied hagiographers with topoi and episodes. These include the holy fool's pious as opposed to provocative stance, the perennial suspicion that he is a sham, and his defiance of authorities. Ivanov further argues that Prokopii's alleged follower, Ioann of Ustiug, in fact preceded him chronologically.

Ivanov devotes an entire chapter, "The Iurodivyi and the Tsar," to buttressing the Russian holy fool's staple role as the challenger of the authorities. As he explores the motif of interconnection between the tsar and the holy fool, he relies on the several versions of the legend of Nikola of Pskov. Ivanov traces the development of this legend from the initial testimonies presenting Nikola as a wizard to the famous account of Jerome Horsey, whose description evokes the essential parameters of the holy foolish paradigm. Ivanov concludes by considering hagiographic records in which the primacy of the holy fool over the Tsar is an established topos.

Well-researched and well-structured, this chapter nonetheless falls short of discussing the tsar's position in the fool-tsar relationship, which also has far-reaching ramifications in Russian culture. This topic has been comprehensively explored in Priscilla Hunt's study of Ivan the Terrible's holy foolery.¹³ Hunt's accomplished piece, which explicates the worldview, behaviours and practices of Ivan the Terrible, is the most complete study of this subject to date and cannot be ignored by scholars of this topic. Ivanov does refer to Hunt's work in the Russian edition's footnote, yet he does not engage it. In the English version of his book, however, he does not mention it at all.¹⁴

Chapter Eleven, "Iurodstvo in an Age of Transition," discusses the gradual decline of holy foolery that took place in the seventeenth century. At that time the term *iurodivyi* was extended to the mentally deranged, fortune-tellers, hermits and buffoons. Traditionally, scholars described Russian hagiographic depictions of holy foolery as formulaic, lacking in concrete detail and purged of eccentricities. Ivanov, however, analyzes several quite eccentric and far-from-bland examples of seventeenth-century Russian lives of fools.

¹³ Priscilla Hunt, "Ivan IV's Personal Mythology of Kingship," *Slavic Review* 52.4 (Winter 1993): 769–809.

¹⁴ See Ivanov, *Blazhennye pokhaby: Kul'turnaia istoria iurodstva* 273, and Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* 295.

Finally, this chapter addresses the changing role of the holy fool during the time of the seventeenth-century Church Schism, when religious dissidents began to exploit it for their purposes by emphasizing its function as a form of protest. Ivanov discusses the dual nature of holy foolery as both an earnest following of the ascetic paradigm and as “playful,” boundless freedom. As an example of playful foolery, he brings forth the case of the sexual aggressiveness of Feodor, the famous *iurodivyi* from *Avvakum’s Life*, toward Boiarynia Morozova. Ivanov views this case not as a re-enactment of a hagiographic topos from the life of Simeon of Emesa—who staged his sexual assault in order to cover for his sanctity—but addresses its ambivalent character. He expands the context of this discussion to Christian heretical movements and in the end questions the ascetic underpinnings of this type of behaviour altogether.

The chapters devoted to Russian *iurodstvo* continuously evoke the contrasting appraisals of its phenomenology by Russian and foreign observers, bringing to the fore the gap between Russia and the West. Russia’s adoption of Western mores included Western attitudes toward its native holy foolery. Peter the Great’s secularizing reforms legislated the suppression of holy foolery as an institution. This development is discussed in the twelfth chapter, “*Iurodstvo* Meets Modernity,” where Ivanov posits that the state-sponsored reforms not only did away with the holy fool’s socio-cultural prominence, but also furthered the disintegration of the paradigm: “holy foolery as it were lost its identity and its inner nerve” (p. 347). The emergence of lunatic asylums in the late eighteenth century furthered the suppression of the cult of the *iurodivye*. Despite these attitudes and restraints, Ivanov argues, holy foolery continued to play a significant role in Russia well into the twentieth century. Its cultural meaning, however, changed. On the one hand it was viewed as a form of social protest. On the other hand, it re-enacted the ascetic martyrdom of the first Christians. Ivanov concludes by addressing the accursed question of the popularity of holy fools in Russia. In sharp contrast with the appraisals of this phenomenon by Western scholars he suggests that Russia’s innate longing for the Absolute assured the holy fool’s prominence.¹⁵

In the following chapters, Ivanov goes on to show the uniqueness of Russian holy foolery against the background of similar phenomena of the East and West. “Eastern Periphery” offers an overview of rabbinic (Talmud, Hassidism) traditions, Tibetan tantrism, Indian Pasupatas sect, Medieval Islam, and Sufi tradition. While a predilection for secret sanctity is the common ground shared by the Sufi mystic and the Eastern Orthodox *iurodivyi*, the aversion to secret sanctity in Western Christianity widens the gap between Western and Eastern Christian traditions. In “The Western Periphery,” Ivanov explores conceptualizations of holy foolery in the

¹⁵ See, for example, Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia* and Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, *Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995). Both scholars see the prominence of the holy fool in Russia as a degraded aspect of Russian cultural tradition.

Catholic and Protestant West and asserts that, “‘Latins’ saw no particular merit in paradoxical holiness” (p. 375). As Ivanov further discusses Western foolery for Christ, he emphasizes that there it was a scholastic rather than real-life phenomenon.

In the concluding chapter, Ivanov dwells on the differences between the cultural environments that hosted Byzantine and Russian fools for Christ. Furthermore, he elucidates the holy fool’s incentives for undertaking this form of asceticism by analyzing a unique medieval document, an extant letter of a would-be-fool-for-Christ, Stefan Trofimovich Nechaev. He sets it in the socio-cultural context of seventeenth-century Russia while also positing that it brings to the fore the very essence of *iurodstvo*, its fusion of limitless self-abasement and greatest pride.

To sum up, Ivanov’s monograph is an important and long-awaited contribution to a number of areas in humanities scholarship, including Cultural Anthropology, Byzantine and Russian history, Byzantine and Medieval Studies, the cultural history of Christianity, early Christianity, church history and asceticism, and Religious Studies in general. Most importantly, Ivanov not only shows the cultural distinctiveness of Byzantine and Russian foolery for Christ but also demonstrates that its phenomenology is characteristic of a wide variety of cultures and that it is, therefore, archetypal in nature. Within the majority of cultures, however, it is seen as peripheral and is, therefore, largely obscure. In Russia, on the other hand, holy foolery was placed at the cultural forefront. Hence the importance of Ivanov’s book for Slavic studies. Furthermore, due to the encyclopaedic scope of this monograph, its original research and its re-evaluation of a number of traditionally accepted issues (e.g., the lineage of Russian urban fools for Christ), its significance for the study of *iurodstvo* by Slavists is truly revolutionary. Besides its scholarly importance, this study has a merit seldom achievable in scholarship of this calibre: its captivating narrative, dynamic vernacular style, and wealth of fascinating historical and literary facts make this scholarly book readily accessible to a general readership.

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