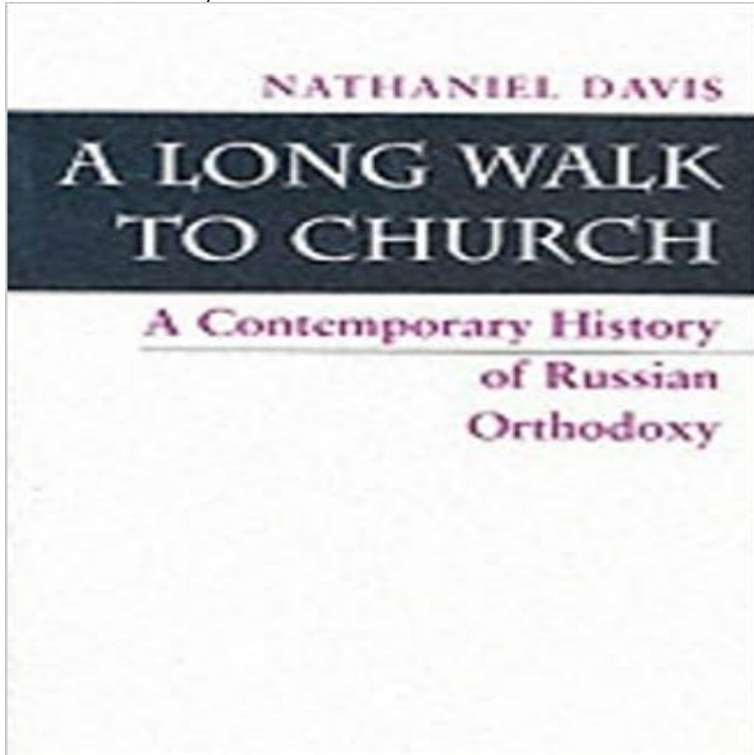


A Long Walk To Church: A Contemporary History Of Russian Orthodoxy



Despite its problems, the Russian Orthodox Church manifests a luminous faith. It has achieved great political influence and is the former Soviet Unions most important vehicle for spiritual and ethical renewal. Nevertheless, it is still a long walk to church in that tormented land. Making use of the formerly secret archives of the Soviet government, Nathaniel Davis offers the first complete account of the history of the Russian Orthodox Church in recent times. Twice in the past sixty years, the church hung on the brink of institutional extinction. In 1939, only four bishops and a few score widely scattered priests were still functioning openly in that vast land. In a single night, Stalin could have arrested them all. Ironically, Hitlers invasion and Stalins reaction to it rescued the church and parishes reopened, new clergy and bishops were consecrated, a patriarch was elected, and seminaries and convents were reinstated. In his paranoid last five years, Stalin reverted to his earlier policies of repression; after his death, Nikita Khrushchev resumed the onslaught against religion. Davis reveals the full scope of Stalins last assault, the limited extent of the reprieve, and the relative continuity of policy in those brutal years of repression under Khrushchev. He shows that under Brezhnev, the erosion of church strength was greater than the world has been told, and that those decades witnessed the low point in the churchs second great crisis of survival. It was none too soon when the Soviet government changed policy in anticipation of millennium of Russias conversion to Christianity in 1988. One could travel a thousand kilometers on the Trans-Siberian railway without coming to a single functioning church. The collapse of communism and the fragmentation of the Soviet empire have created a challenging mixture of opportunity and trouble for Russian Orthodoxy. Thousands of half-destroyed churches have been returned

to believers, but the faithful do not have the money to restore them. Thousands of parishes are without priests. Ukraine, where most of the Orthodox churches were, has fallen into schism, with three feuding Orthodox factions struggling against each other and a resurgent Greek-Catholic community pushing all three eastward. Across the former Soviet Union, the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church bemoan a spiritual vacuum into which are rushing moneyed Protestant evangelists, Catholic proselytizers, Eastern mystics, and even Satanists and telesorcerers. Moreover, Orthodox Church leaders past collaboration with the communist authorities has bedeviled the hierarchs as they struggle to assert moral leadership in a society where the communists worked for seventy-five years to lead the people astray.

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