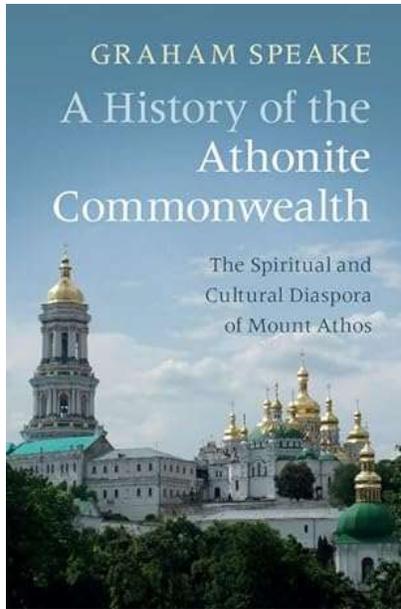


Graham Speake, *A History of the Athonite Commonwealth: The Spiritual and Cultural Diaspora of Mount Athos*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. pp xv, 274, colour photographs, maps, glossary, select bibliography, index, ISBN 978 – 1 – 108 – 44432 – 3 paperback, £27.99.



Reviewed by Fr Stephen Sharman

This is an excellent book. It is well written and its thesis is well and convincingly argued. It is illustrated with colour photographs of the buildings and places that feature in the text. It has useful maps, an adequate index and a select bibliography. It is worth reading.

The author's thesis is that there is an Orthodox commonwealth based in Mount Athos and nurtured by the spirituality of the monks of Mount Athos. In his preface, he writes, "but having written that book, I began to realize that there was more to be said about the importance of Athos, especially about the role that it played in the spread of Orthodoxy, and specifically Orthodox monasticism, throughout eastern Europe and beyond over the past millennium" (page xiii). This commonwealth spreads out from Mount Athos through Greece, Constantinople, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Ukraine and Russia. The language of this commonwealth is Greek but the commonwealth has adopted the languages of all the countries in which it has found new homes. The translations of patristic and spiritual texts into Slavic languages is an important factor in the spread of Orthodoxy and Speake covers that thoroughly. The commonwealth has spread through Alaska into North America by the hands of Russian Orthodox missionaries who were trained in

Russian monasteries. The commonwealth has found new homes in the United Kingdom and France. There is one mention of Canada (page 261). The commonwealth has experienced times of great vitality and times of sloth. The life of the monasteries of Mount Athos has revived and today is enjoying a time of spiritual prosperity. And Graham Speake describes all of this with authority.

Graham Speake has given his readers a work of ecclesiastical history. It is also a work of theology. His exploration of the place of hesychasm in the lives of saints and monks is profoundly theological. He shows his readers how the practice of inner prayer turned the lives of men and women towards the love and mercy of God as sunflowers turn towards the light and the warmth of the sun.

Now let us look more closely at the contents of the book. As a work of both history and theology, the author carefully outlines the histories of the various monastic communities who form the commonwealth. As we read, we learn of founders of monasteries and their travels from country to country. Among the many such saints, we read about St Athanasios the Athonite, St John the Iberian of Georgia, St Anthony and St Theodosios of Kiev, Sy Sava of Serbia, St Gregory of Sinai, St Gregory Palamas, St Theodosius of Trnovo, St Nikodemos of Tismana, St Sergius of Radonezh, St Maximos the Greek, St Kosmas the Aetolian, St Paisey Velichkovsky and St Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain. This catalogue of saints is worthy of the catalogue of saints in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is also an effective way to organize masses of historical material. Each saint is the focus of a chapter which describes his life and the lives of the monasteries which he founded. Each chapter also explores the impact of the monasteries on the countries in which the saints lived and worked. We follow the saints' journeys as they seek for a welcoming monastic community and for spiritual fathers who will guide their steps into a life of profound prayer. This leads to a careful study of hesychasm, its saints and *The Philokalia* which contains the texts of the many monastic writers. This is the theological part of the book, a theology of prayer and spiritual life. The Chapter about St Gregory Palamas is an example of Speake's exposition of the theology of the monastic saints. This is a particularly effective chapter.

This reviewer was particularly intrigued by Chapter 16 "Athos comes to England" (pages 253 – 258). In these pages, Speake talks about a Russian, Sergey Semyonovich Sakharov, who began his life in Russia as an artist. After the Revolution, he escaped to Paris to continue his work as an artist. He found this life to be less satisfactory and turned to theology at the Institute St – Serge. This, too, did

not satisfy his spiritual longing and he travelled to Mount Athos to the Russian monastery of St Panteleimonos. There he found the spiritual mentor and guide whom he needed in the monk, the Elder Silouan. In this, he followed the pattern which we have seen in other saints in this volume. He received the name, Sophrony. Eventually, he returned to the West, first to Paris and then to England where he established a monastery, St John the Baptist, at Tolleshunt Knights in the county of Essex. He wrote books about prayer which embodied what he had learned from his elder and from the monasteries of Mount Athos. This is important. Athonite monasticism is not something exotic found in far off places. It can flourish near at hand in the most English of counties, Essex. What is pleasing to God in one place may be pleasing to God in many places.

This reviewer does not pretend to be an expert on the Byzantine Commonwealth. He read the book in order to expand his knowledge on this subject. Speake's book more than fulfilled his expectations. He therefore strongly recommends the book to others who, like himself, are not specialists in this field and desire to learn. From this book, they certainly will.

About the reviewer. Fr. Stephen Sharman is a priest at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.