



In memoriam Prof. Dr. Nikolai N. Seleznyov (1971–2021)

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Professor Nikolai N. Seleznyov (Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics), a brilliant colleague and dear friend, has succumbed to Covid-19 and passed away on May 13, 2021 in Moscow, just five days before he was to celebrate his 50th birthday.

This is a tragic, sudden, and painful loss. Professor Seleznyov was at the forefront of Syriac and Christian Arabic Studies in Russia and internationally. His scholarly legacy includes eight books, several co-edited collected volumes, and over eighty research articles, bibliographic surveys, and book reviews in Russian and English (some of them translated into Swedish, Arabic, and Armenian).¹

Even prior to receiving his PhD (Centre for the Study of Religions, Russian State University for the Humanities, 2006), Nikolai Seleznyov had published three monographs (in Russian) on the Church of the East: *The Assyrian Church of the East: A Historical Survey* (2001), *The Christology of the Assyrian Church of East* (2002) and *Nestorius and the Church of East* (2005).² These books demonstrate wide erudition and careful reading of primary sources and secondary literature. They also reflect deep familiarity with the living tradition of the Church of the East, through its representation church in Moscow under the auspices of Mar Isaac Yousif, Bishop of the Diocese of Dohuk and Russia, whose letter of blessing (in Syriac, followed by a Russian translation) is appropriately placed at the beginning of *The Assyrian Church of the East: A Historical Survey*. Though these three books have, unfortunately, remained largely inaccessible to western audience, Professor Seleznyov published two articles in English that cover some of the same terrain.³

In the preface to *The Christology of the Assyrian Church of East*, Nikolai Seleznyov explained that “he had to rely mostly on printed materials; information preserved in manuscripts or rare Oriental editions is a subject for future investigations” (p. 9). After the publication of this book, Professor Seleznyov indeed turned his attention to manuscripts and rare Oriental editions. His critical editions and translations of Syriac and Christian Arabic texts include: a Russian translation of the Arabic version of Timothy’s *Disputation with the Caliph al-Mahdī*;⁴ a critical edition and Russian and English translations of al-Arfādī’s *Book on the Concordance of*

¹ Nikolai Seleznyov’s publications can be consulted on the following webpages: <https://www.hse.ru/en/staff/nns> and <https://hse-ru.academia.edu/NikolaiSeleznyov> (accessed: May 20, 2021). Several of his articles are reprinted, with some revisions, in his *Pax Christiana et Pax Islamica: Из истории межконфессиональных связей на средневековом Ближнем Востоке* [Pax Christiana et Pax Islamica: On the History of Interconfessional Ties in the Medieval Middle East] (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2014) (hereinafter abbreviated: PCPI).

² *Ассирийская Церковь Востока: Исторический очерк* [The Assyrian Church of the East: A Historical Survey] (Moscow: The Assyrian Church of the East, 2001); *Христология Ассирийской Церкви Востока: Анализ основных материалов в контексте истории формирования вероучения* [The Christology of the Assyrian Church of the East: An Analysis of Fundamental Materials in the Context of the History of Doctrine Formation] (Moscow: Euroasiatica, 2002); *Несторий и Церковь Востока* [Nestorius and the Church of the East] (Moscow: Put’, 2005).

³ “The Church of the East & Its Theology: History of Studies,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 74 (2008), pp. 115-131; “Nestorius of Constantinople: Condemnation, Suppression, Veneration; With Special Reference to the Role of His Name in East-Syriac Christianity,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 62.3–4 (2010), pp. 165-190. The latter article does much to correct the popular misconception that the Church of the East shunned Nestorius’ theological legacy.

⁴ *Богословские собеседования между Католикосом Церкви Востока Мар Тиматеосом I (727–823) и халифом ал-Махди, повелителем правоверных* [Theological Conversations between Mār Ṭīmātā’us I (727–823), Catholicos of the Church of the East, and the Caliph al-Mahdī, Commander of the Faithful] (Moscow: The Assyrian Church of the East, 2005; reprint: 2018).

Faith (also attributed to ʿĪliyyā al-Ġawharī);⁵ Russian and English translations of several sections from the still unpublished first part of al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd’s *Blessed Collection*;⁶ a critical edition and Russian translation of Yōḥannān bar Zoʿbī’s *Explication of Mysteries*;⁷ and an integral critical edition and Russian translation of Elias of Nisibis’ *Book of the Sessions* and *Epistle to the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maġribī*.⁸

On June 4, 2020, Professor Seleznyov defended with distinction his Doctor of Sciences dissertation (analogous to the German Habilitationsschrift) at the Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. In this dissertation, entitled “The *Majālis* of Elias of Nisibis (975–1046) in the Context of Interconfessional Relations as Reflected in the Literary Culture of the Medieval Middle East,” he synthesized his earlier publications on Syriac and Christian Arabic literature, intra-Christian relations, and Christian-Muslim polemic. The bibliography of this dissertation includes 27 manuscripts and 427 publications in Russian, Arabic, Syriac, English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin, and a plethora of other languages.⁹

⁵ «Книга общности веры»: Средневековый восточнохристианский экуменический трактат [“The Book on the Concordance of Faith”: A Medieval Oriental Christian Ecumenical Treatise] (Moscow: Grifon, 2018). See also “Elias Geveri of Damascus’ in Russian Studies of Church History: A Witness to the Two-Finger Sign of the Cross in a Medieval Treatise on Denominations of Syrian Christianity,” *Scrinium* 9 (2013), pp. 366-381; “For They Ascend to Three *maḍāhib* as Their Roots: An Arabic Medieval Treatise on Denominations of Syrian Christianity,” in «Рассыпанное» и «собрание»: стратегии организации смыслового пространства в арабo-мусульманской культуре (Moscow: Sadra, 2015), pp. 122-135.

⁶ “«Коптский историк» – потомок выходца из Тикрита: Ал-Макин ибн ал-ʿАмид и его «История» [A “Coptic Historian,” Descendent of a Tikritian Emigrant: al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd and His “History”], *Точки* 10.1–2 (2011), pp. 45-53 (on the emperors Claudius and Aurelian); “Хроника или исторический роман? Царствование Зинона и события на Востоке по «Благословенному собранию» ал-Макина ибн ал-ʿАмйда” [A Chronicle or a Historical Novel: The Reign of Zeno and the Events in the East According to al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd’s “Blessed Compilation”], in: *Aeternitas. Сборник статей по греко-римскому и христианскому Египту* (Moscow: The Centre for Egyptology of the Russian Academy of the Sciences, 2012), pp. 120-148 (reprint: *PCPI*, pp. 129-153); “Царствование императора Анастасия по «Благословенному собранию» ал-Макина ибн ал-ʿАмйда” [Emperor Anastasius’ Reign According to al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd’s “Blessed Compilation”], *Религиоведение* 1 (2013), pp. 50-59; “The Laments of the Philosophers over Alexander the Great according to *The Blessed Compendium* of al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd,” *Scrinium* 10 (2014), pp. 97-114; “al-Makīn ibn al-ʿAmīd on Moses of Crete,” *Scrinium* 15 (2019), pp. 321-327 (includes an edition).

⁷ *Yōḥannān Bar Zoʿbī and his «Explication of Mysteries»: Critical Edition, Translation, and Analysis* [Yōḥannān bar Zoʿbī and His “Explication of Mysteries”: A Critical Edition, Translation, and Analysis] (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2014; reprint: 2018).

⁸ «Книга собеседований» ʿИлии, митрополита Нисивина, с везиром Абу-л-Қасимом ал-Хусайном ибн ʿАли ал-Мағриби и Послание митрополита ʿИлии везиру Абу-л-Қасиму [Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis’ “Book of the Sessions” with the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Husayn ibn ʿAlī al-Maġribī and the Metropolitan Elias’ Epistle to the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim], 2 vols. (Moscow: Grifon, 2018); cf. my review of this publication in *Hugoye* 21.1 (2018), pp. 236-240. See also “Seven Sessions or Just a Letter? Observations on the Structure of the Disputations between Elias, Metropolitan of Nisibis, and the Vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Maġhribī,” *Scrinium* 14.1 (2018), pp. 434-445.

⁹ The dissertation (with a summary in English) can be consulted at <https://www.hse.ru/sci/diss/350704970> (accessed: May 20, 2021).

Somewhat unexpectedly for those readers who have come to know him as a specialist in Syriac, Christian Arabic, and Christian-Muslim relations, in the afterword of his dissertation Nikolai Seleznyov proposed to look in the opposite direction from the one he had been examining all along and focus on “the opposite end of the medieval *Pax Islamica*—Ilkhanid Iran where Muslim intellectuals were in contact with Mongolian Buddhists.” He therefore offered a Russian translation and analysis of the Arabic version of the Buddhist *Devatāsūtra*, preserved in Rašīd al-Dīn’s early fourteenth-century *Compendium of Histories* (*Ġami‘ al-tawāriḥ*).¹⁰

This novel and, to my knowledge, unprecedented comparison of “Islamochristiana” and “Islamobuddhica” allowed Professor Seleznyov to reach the following profound conclusion: “We have seen that the contact [of Islamic and Buddhist cultures] has resulted in a semantically two-layered text [the Arabic version of the *Devatāsūtra*] *deliberately* designed to be read differently by representatives of each tradition. What about the Muslim-Christian dialogue that we are here considering? Is the ‘text,’ so to speak, of [Elias of Nisibis and the vizier’s] consensus two-layered in a similar fashion? On the one hand, we must answer this question in the affirmative: yes, it is deliberately two-layered and even multi-layered, because ... the Christian views are pushed to the limit of what is conceivable from the point of view of Christian doctrine, while their acceptability to the Muslim thinker tests the limits of his favourable disposition. ... On the other hand, we must acknowledge that though the *Majālis* are indeed semantically two-layered, as has just been indicated, the commonality [of the interlocutors’ worldviews] runs much deeper, their ‘consensus’ being not just a diplomatic gesture, but a manifestation of this commonality. ... Of course, one can invoke the shared ‘Abrahamic’ heritage, but ... [more significantly], Elias and the vizier spoke *the same language*, this being not simply the Arabic of everyday conversation, but the language of Arabic thought of a considerable degree of abstraction” (pp. 205-206). It is precisely this sharedness of conceptual apparatus and deeply held patterns of thought that, according to Nikolai Seleznyov, makes “Islamochristiana,” exemplified by Elias of Nisibis’ conversation with the vizier Abū l-Qāsim al-Mağribī, such a unique phenomenon and sets it apart from “Islamobuddhica.”

Professor Seleznyov was an active member of Hugoye and NASCAS mailing lists. In this informal capacity, he has helped countless colleagues and friends across the globe with bibliography and expert advice. Jointly with Grigory Kessel, he published annual bibliographic surveys of Russian publications in Syriac and Christian Arabic Studies. These surveys have been extremely helpful in familiarizing western audience with Russian scholarship on these subjects.¹¹

¹⁰ “Devatāsūtra в арабском «Сборнике летописей» Рашид ад-Дина” [Devatāsūtra in Rašīd al-Dīn’s Arabic “Compendium of Histories”], *Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом* 38.3 (2020), pp. 237-254 (with an edition of the Arabic text).

¹¹ Bibliography for 2010–2012: *Hugoye* 16.1 (2013), pp. 134-155; for 2013: *Hugoye* 17.1 (2014), pp. 132-140; for 2014: *Hugoye* 18.1 (2015), pp. 125-145; for 2015: *Hugoye* 19.1 (2016), pp. 247-257; for 2016: *Hugoye* 20.1 (2017), pp. 317-331; for 2017: *Hugoye* 21.1 (2018), pp. 127-141; for 2018: *Hugoye* 22.1 (2019), pp. 295-305; for 2019: *Hugoye* 23.1 (2020), pp. 181-191; for 2020: *Hugoye* 24.1 (2021), pp. 299-316 (all the above compiled jointly with Grigory Kessel). For a bibliography of earlier publications, see “Новые публикации по сириологии на русском языке” [New Publications in Syriac Studies in Russian], *Scrinium* 2 (2006), pp. 481-487 and 4 (2008),

Nikolai will be deeply missed by everyone who has known him, has been impressed by his profound wisdom and erudition, and touched by his extraordinary generosity and kindness. May he rest in peace! Memory eternal! **إِلَيْكُنْ ذِكْرُهُ مُؤَبَّدًا**! Вѣчная память!

pp. 394-402 (both of these jointly with Grigory Kessel) as well as Nikolai Seleznyov's own "Annotated Bibliography of Syriac Studies in Russian, 2009," *Нугоге* 13.1 (2010), pp. 108–117.