

In retrospect by Mikhail Mina

The Gospel of Afranius: The Holy History as an Object of a Detective Inquiry

by Kirill Es'kov

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During the Soviet period in Russia, 'militant atheism' was a cornerstone of the official ideology. Scientists were ordered to be atheists, the result predictably being that even those who did not believe were in sympathy with the believers. It seemed that the fields of religion and science were different and no problem would arise if there was no trespassing from either side. Most scientists avoided participating in official antireligious campaigns, and religious activists had neither desire nor opportunity to start the brawls.

The situation changed with the fall of the communist regime. Russian scientists began to find all kinds of missionaries and mystics grazing in their kitchen garden, some of them migrants from outside, some mutated from the local stock. Now the former owners feel uneasy. It still seems unethical (and hardly possible) to kick the trespassers out, but it is also humiliating to endure the invasion silently. Such is the historical context within which *The Gospel of Afranius* should be assessed.

Kirill Es'kov is a specialist in the palaeontology and zoogeography of spiders, and a senior scientist at the Palaeontological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. The appearance of *The Gospel of Afranius* was stimulated by *The Resurrection Factor* by Josh McDowell (Thomas, 1981). McDowell maintains that he analysed all the possible materialistic explanations of events following the crucifixion of Christ as they are described in the New Testament and found none satisfactory. In his view, it is enough to conclude that here we are faced with the direct intervention of God.

Es'kov defines his own position clearly and precisely. He writes: "As for religion, I am an agnostic like many of my colleagues — naturalists. For me it has always been an axiom that there is not and cannot be a proof of God's existence in the sphere of mind. Since Protestant McDowell has rejected Tertullianus' honest 'Credo, quia absurdum' and with his own hands desacralized the text of the Gospel, he



analysing fragmentary and not very reliable data can do even in an area outside his normal domain. He does it brilliantly in the first part of the book, discovering a lot of 'logical possibilities' overlooked by the opponent even though, playing fair, he accepts 'presumption of honesty', excluding any version that implies fraud committed by Christ or the apostles.

The second part of the book contains a story written, the author assures us, by Afranius, the chief of Pontius Pilate's Secret Service, a person well known to Russian readers as a character in a popular novel, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. The story describes an operation of the Secret Service that used Christ without his knowledge. The witty narration is excellently stylized as a modern 'spy novel' and perfectly dovetails into the *Gospel's* scenario.

The story explains how skilful professionals could stage a 'resurrection' using substitutes after Christ died on the cross and manage to convince the apostles that they had seen nobody but their resuscitated rabbi. The author says: "You wanted a materialistic explanation, didn't you? All right, here you are!" The humour is sometimes biting, but never insulting.

The manuscript was offered to several publishers but none wanted to spoil its relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, so the author had to publish the book himself. It has already won admirers. In 1997, it won the Grand Prix at the Festival of Science Fiction Authors in Odessa. There is reason to think that *The Gospel of Afranius* would find many interested readers if it were published in English.

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deliberately got involved in a rather risky game on the field of the opponent. Unable to withstand the temptation I have accepted his challenge."

After that Es'kov demonstrates what a specialist accustomed to

of fossils more soundly into ancient communities, and thereby allow palaeoecology to realize its most exciting potential: unravelling the history of communities.

So there is a real dilemma in writing a palaeoecological text. Should it keep faith with its eclectic but problematic traditions, and dutifully cover everything studied in its name, or should it be based on a consistent rationale? Brenchley and Harper's contents list reveals a pragmatic solution that undoubtedly does justice to the subject as it has been studied. They give a rich range of palaeoecological case histories, organized under straightforward headings, some as Earth science (environmental indicators), some as life science (populations and communities, trace fossils), some as essential background (environmental controls, taphonomy), and just one not strictly palaeoecological at all (palaeobiogeography). The scale ranges from detailed considerations of the morphology of individual organisms to the global history of the biosphere.

The younger parts of the fossil record, and the palaeoecology of carbonate environments considering the latter's biotic richness and role in carbon burial and climate change, are not well covered, while the intriguing ecology of modular and social organisms is overlooked. And some of the references seem a little old.

Nevertheless, students and teachers will find this by far the most satisfactory palaeoecological text to date. Yet, nearly 30 years on, Lawrence's challenge still stands. □

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New Journals

This year, *Nature's* annual new journals review supplement will appear in the issue of 10 September. Publishers and learned societies are invited to submit journals for review, as well as details of any eligible electronic journals, taking note of the following criteria:

- Journals must have first appeared during or after June 1996 and issued at least four separate numbers by the end of May 1998.
- Journals covering any aspect of science are eligible, although those dealing with clinical medicine and pure mathematics are excluded, as are newsletters and publications of abstracts.
- Frequency of publication must be at least three times a year.
- The main language is English.
- Deadline for submission is 5 June.

Please send at least four different issues (the first, the most recent and any two others) of each eligible title, together with full details of subscription rates, to: Peter Tallack, *Nature*, Porters South, Crinan Street, London N1 9XW, UK. Tel: +44 (0)171 843 4567. e-mail: p.tallack@nature.com

indicated, he could identify the sedimentary environment!" For marine palaeoecologists at least, the Earth science tendency has surely been uppermost, whereas D. R. Lawrence, in a seemingly long-forgotten appraisal published in 1971, reclaimed it as a life science.

This dichotomy is not all. As Lawrence also argued, palaeoecologists have relied too much on applying recent ecology to the past, "yet this methodology proves nothing since working methods presuppose static

natural histories through time". Instead, he challenges us to concentrate on the environmental indications of fossil-bearing sediments, and on the inherent evidence of the fossils themselves. In other words, for palaeoecology to go forward it has to be structured around rigorous methodologies for reconstructing the mode of life of ancient organisms, independently of simplistic uniformitarianism. I believe this is vital if we are to translate mere assemblages