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Orthodox Identities in Western Europe: Migration, Settlement and Innovation

Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

320 pages, £70, ISBN: 978-1-4094-6754-0.

MARIA HÄMMERLI AND JEAN-FRANÇOIS MAYER (EDS.)

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The existence of an Orthodox religious and cultural identity is often taken for granted when speaking about religious belonging in Orthodox majority countries, but what happens when Orthodox believers migrate to non-Orthodox countries? This is the question addressed by this edited volume, which fills a significant gap in the research on contemporary Orthodox Christianity. The editors observe that “it is ... when one faces religious otherness and a minority status in a migration context that the question ‘What does it mean to be Orthodox?’ arises” (p. 4-5), and they state “Orthodox migration in Western Europe matters” (p. 1), inviting the readers to widen scholarly attention on religious pluralism in Europe beyond the focus on Islam and enlarge the range of the analysis to the large group of Christian immigrants.

But to whom does Orthodox migration in Western Europe matter? Unlike Islamic immigration, which is widely perceived and studied through the lens of immigrant integration and security, the Orthodox migration to the West that we find portrayed in this book matters, first and foremost, to Orthodoxy itself.

Migration challenges the traditional Orthodox Churches much more than it challenges the respective host-societies, aptly called “post-Christian” by Alexander Agadjanian in his endorsement. Controversies over Orthodox identity for the most part do not emerge at the borders

of the Orthodox migrant community *vis-à-vis* the foreign host society. Unlike Islam, Orthodoxy is not widely perceived as potential obstacle to immigrant-integration; on the contrary, it may even be seen as an asset. Controversies over Orthodox identity arise at the hearts of the communities at the very moment when these start to adapt their cultural and religious self-understanding to the new migrant context. Each of the chapters in the volume edited by Maria Hämmerli and Jean-François Mayer offers a facet of how migration and settlement in a foreign context entails challenges and brings forth innovation for the Orthodox tradition.

The issues that emerge in immigration include the construction of identity as minority religion, controversies over jurisdictions and ecclesiology, the emergence of a transnational Orthodoxy detached from national mother churches, the expansion of Orthodoxy through conversion, and the emergence of a Western Orthodox identity. The case studies in the book

confirm that migration and settlement generate a process of identity reconstruction because Orthodox migrations need to deal with the transition from majority status and social and cultural embeddedness in the homeland, to the more secular, religiously pluralistic societies of Western Europe, where they are a minority. (p. 5)

The book covers case-studies from Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Finland and France, Denmark, Ireland, the UK, Sweden and Norway; and it contains facts about a wide range of Orthodox migrant communities: Romanian, Serbian, Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Syriac and Assyrian. In this review, I can pick out only some of the findings for which this volume deserves our greatest attention:

The volume has the great merit of presenting a wide range of historical facts and statistical data. In their introduction the editors sketch the “big picture” and offer a useful periodization of Orthodox migration to the West. In this context, the importance of the fall of communism cannot be overemphasized. This watershed divides the Orthodox migration from countries under communist rule to the West into a “before”, when migration often meant seeking refuge, and an “after”, when migration became a personal choice or economic necessity. The same is not true for Orthodox migration to Western Europe from Greece, former Yugoslavia and the Near East. One difficulty in accounting for commonalities in the Orthodox presence in Western Europe is related precisely to these different experiences across the generations of migrants. The different personal stories of migration “impact religious organisation and the way migrants participate in parish life, which is the space where the various waves of migrants meet and negotiate their religious identity, pastoral needs and representations about the vocation and mission of the Church (p. 7).”

A recurring theme in several chapters is the question of religious leadership. This topic is addressed by several authors: by Suna Gülfer Ihlamur-Öner in her chapter on Romanian Orthodox priests in Italy, by Naures Atto in her chapter on Syriac Orthodox in Sweden, Berit Thorbjørnsrud in her chapter on Orthodox priests in Norway, and by Maria Hämmerli and Edmund Mucha in their chapter on the crisis in the diocese of Sourozh in Britain (this last chapter, by the way, finally provides a most welcome comprehensive treatment of an event that has received a lot of attention in the scholarly community). Priests face particular challenges in migration: they need to be open minded (p. 40) and innovative in their communication with believers (p. 41); they are expected to promote a collective identity of the community in migration (pp. 60-61); and they have to mediate between the demands of the community in the foreign country

and the hierarchy of the mother church (p. 193). Thorbjørnsrud describes the challenge faced by priests in migration as follows: “They have to grasp ... that being *appointed* as a congregation’s priest only represents the first step; they have to *become* its priest too. In other words, they have to prove themselves worthy of the congregation’s trust and respect.” (p. 199)

The case-studies from Norway and the UK particularly demonstrate that conflicts can arise between priests who are sent to a country from the homeland and lay believers who are already settled in the new cultural and religious context or are local converts. In these cases, ideas of how a parish should function and the role which a priest should play may diverge drastically. In migration, the laity holds considerable power inside the parish — not least because in the case of unsurmountable problems, believers have the option of changing jurisdictions. Competition between Orthodox Churches is unthinkable in the country of origin, but a reality in migration: “The presence of parallel jurisdictions contributes to a sense of competition” (p. 208), which, in a country like Norway, also implies a competition for money “as public funding depends on the number of members” (p. 208).

One fascinating finding in several of the case-studies in this book is the emergence of a “Western” Orthodox identity through the re-appropriation of Christian forms from the pre-schism era of Christianity. For Switzerland, Maria Hämmerli finds that “in their effort to find and cultivate communalities with the host society, the Orthodox in Switzerland ... have re-appropriated the local saints of the first Christian centuries, resulting in the construction of a common sacred memory”, for example through “an icon of ‘all saints that flourished in the Helvetic lands’” or the celebration by Orthodox communities of the patron-saints of the city of Zurich (p. 125). James A. Kapaló likewise offers a fascinating account of how, in Ireland, “the arrival of Orthodoxy and Orthodox migrants in the West has

given rise to a process of reinterpretation of the West's religious past as prototypically Orthodox" (p. 242), drawing specifically on an idealized narrative of the "historical links between Coptic Egypt and the Byzantine Empire to present a model of Celtic Christianity that is congruent with contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy" (p. 244). As Laurent Denizéau analyses in his chapter on the emergence of a French style of Orthodoxy, individuals whose Orthodox identity is the result of a spiritual journey do not feel that they need to "become Russians or Greeks in order to be Orthodox" (p. 261). Also in France we find that "the advent of Orthodoxy in Western Europe is ... perceived as a potential spiritual regeneration, to the extent to which Orthodoxy in France is envisaged as a potential return to the pre-schism Orthodoxy in Western Europe" (p. 263). Jean-François Mayer, finally, tells the fascinating story of the attempts to develop a "Western rite Orthodoxy". Such "autochthonist discursive practices" (Kapaló, p. 230) testify to the emergence of an Orthodox identity fully detached from national cultural and political contexts and they constitute a real challenge to the model of Orthodox national diasporas.

This book offers a convincing defence of "Orthodoxy" as a category of analysis based on "continuity and consistency in Orthodox liturgy [and] religious practice and doctrine" (p. 3) that overcomes national distinctions. Unfortunately not all of the chapters in this volume consistently apply this category for a transversal interpretation of the Orthodox experience in the West and instead deal with the different Orthodox Churches in the habitual way as separate entities, as Romanian, Russian, Assyrian etc. The editors' introduction does a good job in drawing out the main common themes, but it is also up to the reader to grasp the complete picture and make cross-connections and comparisons. This is a task which requires some perseverance, because the volume gets better as one reads along. Unlike the many edited volumes which one consults for this or that specific essay,

this edited volume becomes a coherent, insightful book in its entirety. Having said this, some of the chapters stand out both in the clarity of their methodological approach, as well as through the breadth of analysis, and the editors would have been well-advised to put these strong essays up front.

This is a very timely publication with high scholarly added value. I have only one final critical remark regarding the use of the term “modernity”. “Modernity” is not something that initially belongs to the West, as the introduction appears to imply: for example when we read “the innovation needed for Orthodox [in the West] to enter into dialogue with modernity” (p. 5) or “innovation is not to be understood from a modern and Western perspective” (p. 21). I am always puzzled by the fact that an approach which acknowledges the multiplicity of experiences of the modern in the East (“innovation in the Orthodox Church consists in a creative interpretation of tradition”, p. 21) fails to give due recognition to the equally diverse experiences of what it means to be modern in the West. Over the past decades, scholarly debate around West-vs.-Orthodox-East has made a big step forward in overcoming binary distinctions like “modern/pre-modern”, or “modernized/backward”. But we are not improving the level of debate much, if we substitute the old dichotomies with a new one: “modern/differently modern”. Our aim should be to overcome binaries once and for all and to acknowledge the reality of Europe’s entangled and multiple modernities, be they in the East or in the West. Migration is the best place to study precisely this.

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