

Editorial

Introduction: “Inward Being and Outward Identity: The Orthodox Churches in the 21st Century”

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As the title indicates, taken together the thirteen papers in this Special Issue of *Religions* give a broad view of what might be called the inner and outer life of the Orthodox Church, with each of the papers focusing on a particular area of research and reflection.

In recent decades, there has been an explosion of books and articles on the Orthodox Churches, both Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox (the articles in this issue focus on the former). There is widespread interest in the spiritual life of the Orthodox Church: prayer, worship, theology, saints, art, music, ascetic practices and ways of living, monasticism, and how its self-understanding as a repository of ancient Christian tradition is interwoven and evolving in what Charles Taylor calls the cross-pressures of the secular age.

At the same time, the quarter-century following the collapse of the Soviet Union has seen the Orthodox Church emerge from persecution and martyrdom to rebuild the infrastructure of churches, monasteries and Christian social services decimated by the Communist years. In that process the Orthodox Churches have also become powerful public, political, nationalist and cultural forces in Russia and Eastern Europe. They are now frequently perceived as closely aligned with restrictive government policies, suspicious of democracy, freedom, human rights and minorities. In contrast, Orthodox Christians in the Middle East live a tenuous existence—often shared with Muslims—in the face of war, sectarian violence and official and unofficial duress and persecution. Meanwhile, in areas of emigration and mission in Western Europe, the Americas, Australia, parts of sub-Saharan Africa and other regions outside its traditional homelands Orthodox Christianity is also taking hold as a self-consciously distinct minority religion that is attracting a steady stream of converts while struggling for its identity in a secular environment increasingly hostile to traditional Christianity.

In the midst of these competing global forces, and an Orthodox world dominated by Old World Churches, the leaders of the disparate and often quarrelsome branches of Eastern Orthodoxy, led by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople as “first among equals,” have been attempting to bring a measure of unity as they seek to remain true to the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3) while also confronting the challenges of the 21st century.

An important step in that direction was taken at “The Holy and Great Council” of the Eastern Orthodox Churches which took place on Crete in June 2016 during the week of Pentecost (<https://www.holycouncil.org>). Patriarch Bartholomew presided, and although the Council’s status and authority are disputed by several of the Orthodox Churches which did not send delegations (Antioch, Russia, Georgia, Bulgaria) the fact remains that this council was decades in preparation and was the largest and most diverse council of Eastern Orthodox bishops in many centuries. The agenda was modest and did not attempt to address some of the most pressing issues facing the Orthodox Churches, but it provoked some valuable discussion (see for example [Nathanael Symeonides 2016](#)). At the very least it demonstrated awareness of questions that the Orthodox must consider and act upon.

The Holy and Great Council has **opened our horizon** towards the contemporary diverse and multifarious world. It has emphasised our responsibility in place and in time, ever with

the perspective of eternity. The Orthodox Church, preserving intact her Sacramental and Soteriological character, is sensitive to the pain, the distress and the cry for justice and peace of the peoples of the world. She “proclaims day after day the good tidings of His salvation, announcing His glory among the nations and His wonders among all peoples” (Psalm 95). (Holy and Great Council 2016, Message 12)

How well are Orthodox Churches listening and responding to the changing cultures they are living in? And in these new conditions what does it mean to be faithful to the inner life of the Church, while being engaged “for the life of the world”? These are the main underlying questions the papers here are attempting to address.

One of the particular aims of this collection has been to give readers unfamiliar with Orthodox Christianity a set of articles that are at once both academically rigorous and also convey the inner dimension of the Church. This means that a number of these scholars are participants in as well as observers of Orthodox life, and can therefore attempt to translate for outsiders that mysterious personal dimension that is at the heart of any religion, and without which descriptions are incomplete. As Andrew Louth has written, Christian theology is not simply a matter of learning, “it is tested and manifested in a life that lives close to the mystery of God in Christ . . . and, so far as it is discerned, awakens in the heart a sense of wondering awe which is the light in which we see light” (Louth 1983, p. 147).

The articles collected here address a range of theoretical issues and contemporary cases that illustrate them.

In “Orthodoxy in Engagement with the ‘Outer’ World: The Dynamic of the ‘Inward-Outward’ Cycle” *Razvan Porumb* looks at the forces that drive Orthodox inner life and its engagement with the secular and ecumenical worlds. *Rico Monge* explores secularization theory and its relation to Russia in “Neither Victim nor Executioner’: Essential Insights from Secularization Theory for the Revitalization of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Contemporary World.” The increasing influence of religion on filmmaking in “post-secular” Russia is the subject of “Knocking on a Saint’s Door, or a Quest for Holiness in a Post-Secular Society” by *Natalia Naydenova and Yulia Ebzeeva*.

Two articles look specifically at Orthodox thinking (and action) in relation to other religions and other Christian bodies. *Paul Ladouceur* gives a comprehensive overview and analysis in “Religious Diversity in Modern Orthodox Thought.” In “Ecumenism: Rapprochement Through Co-working to Reconciliation” *Cyril Hovorun* reconsiders the methods of ecumenism by looking at the example of Christians from different churches co-working during the Ukrainian Maidan (the revolution of 2014). He sees co-working as a fruitful methodology for making ecumenical progress.

Liturgy is at the heart of Orthodox life. *Christina M. Gschwandtner* examines its philosophical underpinnings in “Mimesis or Metamorphosis? Eastern Orthodox Liturgical Practice and Its Philosophical Background.” She explores how liturgy negotiates imitation and transformation, inner and outer, heavenly and earthly. *Nicholas Denysenko’s* “Death and Dying in Orthodox Liturgy” looks at the ways liturgy shapes the inner and outer lives of worshippers as rehearsal of dying and rising to new life.

In “The Liturgy of Life: Alexander Schmemmann” *Michael Plekon* reviews and assesses the life and work of the leading Orthodox liturgical theologian of the 20th century.

Dumitru Staniloae (1903–1993) was the foremost Romanian theologian of the 20th century. He argued that Orthodox emphasis on liturgy needs to be balanced with service to people. *Ionut Untea* considers this in “Service and Pro-Existence in the Thought of Romanian Theologian Dumitru Staniloae: A Path for the Orthodox Church Facing the Challenge of Globalization.”

Two articles address specific contemporary issues: ecology and sexuality. *Elizabeth Theokritoff* surveys Orthodox thinking on the environment in “Green Patriarch, Green Patristics: Reclaiming the Deep Ecology of Christian Tradition.” Orthodox writers are increasingly going deep into the sources of Orthodox thought and practice to consider the spiritual significance of the material universe and the place of human beings within it. *Joseph William Black*, who teaches theology in Kenya, analyzes the

results of a survey of some 500 Kenyan youth in “Sex, Abortion, Domestic Violence and Other Unmentionables: Orthodox Christian Youth in Kenya and Windows into Their Attitudes about Sex.”

Two of the contributions bring a more personal dimension to the collection, which is entirely appropriate for an issue dealing with “inward being.” *Mary Ford’s* essay, “Reflections on Reading the Scriptures as an Orthodox Christian,” argues that while historical criticism is valuable in an Orthodox context (she teaches New Testament and hermeneutics in an Orthodox seminary), the ultimate purpose of reading Scripture is to become holy, and this “is achieved primarily through living the gospel.”

Kyriacos C. Markides reflects on thirty years of field research as a sociologist in “The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy: A Personal Journey of Discovery.” He argues that the spiritual practices of the Christian East may contribute to “the cultivation of the intuitive, spiritual side of human beings that has been repressed over the centuries because of the dominance of rationalism and scientific materialism.”

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