

The Orthodox Identity Crisis: A Review Essay

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Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 380 pp.

Maria Hammerli and Jean-François Mayer, ed., *Orthodox Identities in Western Europe: Migration, Settlement, and Innovation* (Ashgate, 2014), 306 pp.

These two recent monographs have contributed much to our understanding of how Orthodox Christianity is coming to terms with itself as a truly transnational global religion. In so doing, both *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness* and *Orthodox Identities in Western Europe* complement key works that have recently established themselves. Here, one might think of *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, edited by George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou,¹ Amy Slagle's work on American converts and the marketplace,² and my own work examining the theological underpinnings to American Orthodox convert movements.³

¹ George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, ed., *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

² Amy Slagle, *The Eastern Church in the Spiritual Marketplace: American Conversions to Orthodox Christianity* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2011).

³ D. Oliver Herbel, *Turning to Tradition: Converts and the Making of an American Orthodox Church* (New York: Oxford, 2013).

Each of the two books here reviewed is a collection of essays gathered together to form chapters around a singular theme. In the case of that edited by Krawchuk and Bremer, the essays consist of papers delivered at the eighth World Congress of the International Council for Central and East European Studies. The essays are divided into six sections examining: pluralism, differences and convergence, critiques of the West, encounters with European values, religious consensus and cooperation, and Post-Soviet Central Asia. Some of the themes explored include the degree to which a framework of an Orthodox civilization versus the West has replaced prior Cold War divisions, the notion that secularization in traditionally Orthodox countries can mean “belonging without believing,” and the current self-reflections and rediscovery of Orthodoxy that Orthodox worshippers, theologians, and clergy are currently undertaking.

Although each essay is worthy of an individual assessment, a few essays merit special consideration. Alfons Brüning’s presentation of morality and patriotism in Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy proves prescient in light of Putin’s efforts to combine his zeal for Russian nationalistic pride with the historical lineage and prestige of Russian Orthodoxy. Brüning noted that Western liberalism and secularism are often seen as the main opponents of Russian Orthodoxy. Russian Orthodox scholars often draw a line from the French Revolution to the Soviet era to contemporary secular voices.⁴ Brüning traces this simplistic, oppositional stance toward the West to the upheavals that arose in the 1990s. Daniela Kalkandjieva notes a similar rise in nationalism and struggles to come to terms with pluralism, leading to opposition to non-Orthodox religions even while a majority opposes the introduction of religion into the school curriculum.⁵

Such chapters prepare the reader well for those addressing Orthodoxy’s anti-Westernism. Makrides’s chapter on Yannaras proves important here, as Yannaras’s work continues to be

⁴ Alfons Brüning, “Morality and Patriotism: Continuity and Change in Russian Orthodox Occidentalism Since the Soviet Era,” 30.

⁵ Daniela Kalkandjieva, “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church at the Crossroads: Between Nationalism and Pluralism,” 47–63.

influential.⁶ Even while demonstrating reserve and fairness, Makrides's chapter highlighted Yannaras's ahistorical romanticizing of Greek Orthodoxy's past, presupposed superiority of that alleged Greek Orthodox past over against a simplistically false view of a Western, Latin past, and a "quasi-messianic, salvation syndrome."⁷ Makrides is hardly alone in noticing the role a falsely idealized historical past plays in Orthodox criticisms of "the West." Both Julia Anna Lis and Regina Elsner referred to this factor in their chapters as well.⁸

These chapters are those that benefit most fruitfully from being read in conjunction with *Orthodox Constructions*. For example, readers interested in Makrides's chapter would do well to pair it with Basilio Petrà's chapter in *Orthodox Constructions*.⁹ There, Petrà concentrated his essay on important intellectual figures behind Yannaras's thought, including Heidegger. That in itself fits one of the central themes of that book, which was the irony on the part of Orthodox who reject the West all the while utilizing Western theology and philosophy.

Yet one would be mistaken to think the essays in *Orthodox Encounters* omit intra-Orthodox divisions and struggles for identity in order to maintain a simple Orthodox versus the other dichotomy. Anna Briskina-Müller's piece highlights the tensions between fundamentalists and those seeking to find healthier ways to integrate Orthodoxy into contemporary life within the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁰ Her assessment could have been performed on any of the Orthodox Churches, which all have fundamentalist movements. Her investigation of women's concerns made this all too clear. In an era in which medical understanding has greatly surpassed those of Galen,

⁶ Vasilios N. Makrides, "'The Barbarian West': A Form of Orthodox Christian Anti-Western Critique," 141–58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸ Julia Anna Lis, "Anti-Western Theology in Greece and Serbia Today," 159–68 and Regina Elsner, "The Russian Orthodox Church on the Values of Modern Society," 169–75.

⁹ Basilio Petrà, "Christos Yannaras and the Idea of Dysis," in *Orthodox Constructions*, 161–80.

¹⁰ Anna Briskina-Müller, "The Search for a New Church Consciousness in Current Russian Orthodox Discourse," 69–78.