Book Review


Reviewed by: Giuseppe Tateo, Multiple Secularities Research Group, University of Leipzig giuseppe.tateo@uni-leipzig.de

Keywords: migration; Orthodoxy; Romania; Italy; glocalization; sociology.

Italy hosts the largest Orthodox community in Western Europe: the population of Eastern Christians has risen seven times in the last two decades, thus reaching about 1,538,000 people in 2018. Most of them are of Romanian origin and belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Against this background, Marco Guglielmi provides a sociological account of the settlement of Romanian Orthodoxy in Italy. The introduction illustrates the theoretical and methodological tools adopted: Guglielmi combines quantitative data with qualitative material gathered mostly through interviews conducted in Italy and Romania. The theoretical structure of the book frames Victor Roudometof’s theory of “glocalization” of Eastern Christianity at the centre of a wider literature dealing with transnationalism, migration and the interplay of the local and the global in the sociology of religion.

This book provides very valuable data on the expansion of Eastern Christian churches in Italy in the last two decades, making it important reading not just for scholars but for policymakers, churchgoers and religious representatives as well. While investigating the Romanian Orthodox diaspora in Italy, the author doesn’t just report the number of houses of worship (284) and of clerics (327) currently active—also drawing on some recent research advancements on the topic (I. Cozma and M. Giorda, “Sostituire, condividere, costruire: Le parrocchie ortodosse romene nel tortuoso cammino del riconoscimento”, Religione e Società 35(96) (2020): 25–32): he also distinguishes between churches built from scratch, former Catholic churches converted or shared, and converted secular spaces. This is no trivial data: strategies of sacred place-making are crucial in the process of spatialization of religious infrastructure. Several rich, in-depth interviews with Romanian priests in Italy suggest that the establishment of a new parish does not just require everyday diplomacy with their Catholic counterparts but also creative solutions to navigate an increasingly diverse “religioscape”.

The choice to draw on Roudometof’s glocalization theory encourages the author to spot patterns of “vernacularization”, “indigenization” and “(trans)nationalization” of the BOR (Biserica Ortodoxă Română, Romanian Orthodox Church) and its faithful in Italy, that is, how religious universalism blends “with a vernacular language ... or a specific ethnicity” (p. 8). References to a vaguely defined “indigenous dimension” are recurrent throughout the book in the attempt to stay faithful to Roudometof’s glocalization scheme. However,
one has the impression that the data are forced to fit into a rigid theoretical structure. The hundreds of new churches and priests spreading all over Italy have maybe less to do with narratives of Latinity and indigeneity and more with the necessity to guarantee liturgical continuity and social protection, as Guglielmi himself points out in chapter 4. In this respect, the author could have distinguished more clearly between the assumptions of his informants and his own sociological considerations on the pull and push factors behind the Romanian diaspora in Italy.

Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of the presence of Eastern Christians in Italy. Those readers less familiar with Orthodox Christianity will find a clear and detailed presentation of its most important organizational and theological tenets. Guglielmi’s theologically-informed sociology is both varied and detailed, as it draws from Romanian (theologian Dumitru Staniloae), Russian (Saint Maria Skobtsova) and Greek (Bishop Joannis Zizioulas) sources of inspiration. I am convinced together with Guglielmi that there can be no sociology and anthropology of Eastern Christianity without a thorough understanding of ecclesiological, pastoral, liturgical and Christological principles. In this respect, Guglielmi has masterfully combined important concepts like “Holy Tradition” (p. 11), “Living Tradition” (p. 12), “Open Sobornicity” (p. 146), Oikonomia and Akribeia (p. 126), while presenting the positions of clerics and believers he interacted with.

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute the heart of the book and are devoted to the settlement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Italy. Orthodox transnationalism is a fascinating concept that challenges monolithic depictions of Orthodox churches as bound to their national territory and identity. The question posed by Guglielmi is twofold: how does the establishment of new parishes in a Catholic, Western European country happen on the ground? In turn, what kind of remittances—the author borrows the term from migration studies—do religious actors in a diasporic condition send back to their home country? In this glocal condition—suspended between two countries and several denominations at once—the study of the joint veneration of saints by both Western and Eastern Christians in Italy has not just a devotional dimension (the author talks of “politics of saints”) but constitutes one of the most fascinating and promising research directions.

A conclusion wrapping up the main arguments concludes this important book, which will draw the attention of scholars interested in topics as diverse as migration, Orthodoxy, globalization, ritual, and the sociology of organizations. It is exactly because this contribution advances our knowledge of global Orthodoxy on so many levels that it is a pity it also indulges in biased representations of (post)socialist Romania. On page 188 the author admits to being hasty concerning the communist period. This is possibly the reason why misleading conclusions about (post)communism recur throughout the book. Unsubstantiated observations on the communist legacy as “‘foggy’ with public affairs” (p. 119) and “causing a deficit … in dealing with contemporary challenges” (p. 15) do not go further than reinstating stereotypes on socialist Romania. The devastation of the social and economic life is exclusively attributed to socialist governance (p. 56), while there is no reference at all to the calamitous shock-therapy measures adopted by post-socialist governments. A closer look at the vast literature tackling the hasty privatization and the consequent primitive accumulation of state assets would have helped provide a more comprehensive picture of societal and economic change after 1989.

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