BOOK REVIEW


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The topic of Americans converting to Orthodox Christianity is clearly understudied. By and large, as the author observes in the book’s opening chapter, the conventional image of Eastern Orthodoxy in the US remains that of a faith that is relatively exotic and not engaged with this country’s thriving culture of religious pluralism. Underneath the official image though there is another reality that exists at the level of individual parishes. The author’s goal is to map this reality by writing the first ever monograph of US converts to Orthodoxy. Based on 48 interviews with converts, congregation members and clerics collected mainly in Pittsburgh and Mississippi this ethnographic study offers an insight onto the way in which Eastern Orthodoxy operates within the American culture of religious pluralism.

The book addresses nearly all the main issues of traditional scholarly concern. It divides converts into two groups: on the one hand, there are religious seekers who arrive at Orthodoxy after shopping around into various churches within the US religious marketplace; and, on the other hand, there are intermarriage converts, who join Orthodoxy after a period of indirect engagement through their spouse or the local community. These two categories, the author argues, are often dealt with differently by both priests and other members of their congregation. Seekers are typically subjected into a lengthy process of catechesis in order to secure the firmness of their commitment; while spouses are often dealt with in a more laid back manner, as it is assumed that they have acquired a familiarity with Orthodoxy through their communal engagement and their marriage. Converts are sometimes critical of aspects of ethnicity present within individual parishes; yet, they also appear at times to partake into ethnic identifications by discovering real or imaged ethnic roots of their own in Orthodoxy. In other words, converts are not invariably opposed to the intertwining between ethnicity and Orthodoxy, and they might consider ethnic elements as congruent and not opposite to the faith itself. Of course, converts sometimes stress the originality and authenticity of Orthodoxy as a
theme of key significance (141). The theme of Americanness emerges more markedly in the book’s seventh chapter, which examines the operation of an Orthodox parish in Mississippi—a cultural milieu far removed from the second, third, or even fourth generation Eastern European immigrant communities of Pennsylvania.

Interestingly, “when reflecting on what a specifically American Orthodoxy would look like, many informants outlined a vision of cultural inclusivity and affirmation reminiscent of American liberal ideas of multiculturalism, even if [...] they] considered multiculturalism [...] corrosive to traditional Christianity” (138). In fact, this image reflects the overall attractiveness of Orthodox Christianity to seekers; for it is considered to offer a true faith that excludes understandings and practices of the religious marketplace, such as the situational attraction and fluid nature of religious following. One cannot help but speculate whether Orthodoxy appears an attractive option for those individuals who reject notions of pluralism as such, and in the process they reject key understandings and value orientations of US society and culture. That might also offer a potential explanation for the relatively marginal position of Eastern Orthodoxy in the American mainstream religious landscape.

This observation is related to the broader problematic of the monograph. That is, the conventional understanding of US-based Orthodoxy remains that of a faith largely affiliated with Eastern European immigrants. By adopting the ethnographic method the author in effect explores the Americanization of Orthodoxy, which of course is not a new or novel phenomenon but has at least a history of several decades. Still, because of her commitment to Herbert Gans’ notion of “symbolic ethnicity” as indicating the folk-style survival of ethnic habits of the heart, she underestimates the significance of these processes for the reproduction and perseverance of ethnicity not as a relic of the past but as part of the very fabric of twenty-first century America. The framing of the topic and the selection of the ethnographic sites effectively excludes the themes of transnationality, trans-border relations, global ethnography and the intertwining of religion and ethnicity in terms of the relations between home and host countries. There is every reason to believe that these themes are worthy of offering a far greater insight onto the dynamics of US-based Orthodox Christianity than those offered by following the author’s more conventional qualitative research strategy. Indeed, the author admits that the majority of social-scientific studies actually refer to the aforementioned topics.
Of course, it is also fair to say that these issues fall outside the book’s scope and the author’s intention has been to move beyond these well-known issues. Still, these issues have a lot to do with the author’s choice of parishes and by extension they influence the outcome of the research as reported in the book and subsequently the image of Orthodox Christianity that emerges from within the book’s pages. I therefore maintain that both in its native homelands as well as in North America, Orthodox Christianity remains committed to a church-nation link that marks the faith’s adoption into and accommodation within modernity. In this respect, conversions as well as adoption into the US-based spiritual marketplace are occasions that incarnate the faith’s engagement with a radically different cultural model. These contexts therefore provide the opportunity to imagine a different version of Orthodoxy unfettered by its association with nations and ethnicities. This association is expressed through the different institutional structures of the Orthodox Church. Consequently, imagining a single American Orthodoxy is an image that in itself prescribes a new religious model for Orthodoxy. But how feasible is that? The book does not reflect or even provide adequate coverage of Orthodoxy’s institutional structure in North America; nor does it inquire into the differences between Greek Orthodox parishes and the parishes of the Orthodox Church of America (OCA); or the OCA’s ambiguous institutional standing, as it is recognized by the Patriarchate of Moscow but not by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. There is further no statistical information on the numerical strength of Orthodox Christianity in the US; or even a discussion of the numerical strength of converts within the different institutional settings investigated. Such details would greatly help the reader differentiate between the typical and the exceptional, as non-specialists have no way of grasping the difference between the two. In other words, the full image of Orthodoxy in the US does not emerge from this book’s pages—but only the image of Orthodoxy as that appears from within the eyes of the convert, and within specific contexts that might not be entirely representative of the overall US situation.

Obviously, since no book can accomplish everything, the aforementioned questions could very well serve as a new point of departure for future research in the area. In conclusion, regardless of the aforementioned points, this is an important ethnography that represents a first attempt to discern the impact of Americanization into Orthodox Christianity. The book clearly and unequivocally fills a lacuna in the existing literature and is a valuable and welcome addition to the growing understanding of Orthodox Christianity as a faith worthy of inclusion,
study and attention similar to that conventionally reserved for the other two branches of Christianity.