Lucian N. Leustean, ed. "Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century" (Book Review)

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This massive and very impressive volume presents an unusually broad and contemporary picture of Eastern and Oriental churches, now spread globally, with a primary focus on politics, or the relationship between Orthodoxy and state formations. There are virtually no American authors, instead the contributors tend to be British and German scholars who are specialists, but perhaps more crucially, many of the chapters were written by the new scholars from Eurasia and eastern Europe. As a collective work, it is held together rather well, by a key set of focused questions. Writers were also required to add short historical sketches, biographies of key current leaders, current statistics. The final bibliography, going beyond what was cited in footnotes, caused me to mark obviously crucial books on each of the five pages, which I should have known about. That is, this volume covers so much ground that all of us need to learn, that the usual criticisms one finds with specific entries pale against its overall contribution to scholarship.

Divided into five parts of uneven size, it can be read through consecutively, could even serve as a course text for the seriously interested, or it can be browsed through and scanned many times, as will likely be this writer’s frequent return to it - a trove of necessary data for comparisons, and for clues to scarce sources for the period covered--1989-2012 approximately. When reading selectively, checking the primary themes as identified in Leustean’s opening essay, and demonstrated in his own essay on the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the reader can quickly pick out the parallels in other chapters to discover both commonalities and crucial contextual differences. Leunstean’s overview essay is selective in theme, expecting the reader to check his 2010-edited volume *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945-91*.

The four primary themes addressed are presented as questions: 1) Is there a specific model of church state relations in Eastern Christianity? 2) How did Orthodox churches survive “the fall of communism”? 3) How have Eastern churches engaged with national and international political actors after 1989? 4) Which are the main challenges faced at the dawn of the third millennium? Among the key developments Leunstean listed as general summary, was the reality (here limited to eastern Europe & Eurasia) that “churches became part of social and political realities” in ways unlike the pervasive pluralisms of the West, at least at first. Often therefore heads of churches sought to influence beyond the spiritual domain in the new contests of nationalism or for the soul of a people. This ranged from clergy joining political parties, becoming cabinet minister (Poland), hierarchs became members of Parliament (Belarus). More widespread as legacy from the communist era of religious oppression, were the tensions
over church splits as old and new churches, or old compromised and new leaders failed to cooperate. Among the longest lasting have been the Bulgarian new and old synod, and the competing jurisdictions in Ukraine. Another broad theme was the growing contest for influence after an initial period of mutual recognition, between the Ecumenical Patriarchate (often issuing Tomos recognizing the autonomy of churches thought to be in the Russian Orthodox sphere) and the Russian Patriarchate reverting to Third Rome themes. Leunstean’s point was that along the way both the Ecumenical and Russian Patriarchs underwent considerable shift in their policies over the course of two decades, with the outcome still unclear, given the other limits to control that the passing of the Soviet Union, now brought to light—including a much more democratized public and multiplicity of ethnic loyalties. Yet that section also concludes with a reference to Patriarch Kirill’s plea to President Putin to use his influence in aid of two kidnapped Syriac Orthodox hierarchs, a sign of further rapprochement of Orthodox and Oriental churches. Seldom do the chapters reach beyond 2012, and Leunstein also ended his chapter before the announced plans for a Pan-Orthodox Council in 2015, with tones of common prayers for all Eastern and Oriental Christians in the spring 2014 planning meeting attended by Patriarch Bartholomew and Patriarch Kirill.

Leunstein’s overview also includes detailed lists to “map Eastern Christianity”: 1) Chalcedonian churches, the fifteen autocephalous churches in full communion, but listed under four sub-headings, the 4th group listing 19 churches “not in communion with” the first 15 or the 14 “autonomous” Chalcedonian churches listed under the 3rd sub-heading. Then follow 2) Autocephalous non-Chalcedonian churches, ‘Oriental’ or ‘Monophysite’ in Leunstein’s terminology. These include 7 major Orthodox communions, often with sub-headings for regional branches. Also listed as main categories #5-7 are Greek Catholic, ‘Uniate’ or ‘Eastern Catholic’ churches (21 jurisdictions), ‘True Orthodox’ or ‘Old Calendarist’ (7), and ‘Old Believers’ (6 branches listed, all within former Soviet territory). Another category #8-9 named and described “Orthodox sects” and Protestant churches emerging from Orthodox/Oriental traditions “in the process of becoming autonomous”, as well as listing separately as category #4 the “Assyrian Church of the East” and its branches. This already covered more of the Orthodox world than the book chapters manage to do, and were Leunstein to include the indigenous free churches (not meaning Orthodox sects) the Pandora’s box would have opened to excessive complexity. What comes through instead in so many chapters is a sense of how leaders and faithful think and perceive the changing social dynamics, when accustomed mostly to “everyone” being Orthodox in their society, even atheists who claimed Orthodox culture.

That latter point helps one catch better the nuanced changes for the book’s primary theme, asking what church-state model is in place. Summarized in short, in some churches the tendency to revert to state
recognition of Orthodoxy as religion of the nation/state, almost in a caesaro-papist style, or some form of “traditioned” church seeking to have a voice in culture, but in a more modern way limiting itself to a spiritual sphere. That of course should evoke questions about the status of the Symphonia concept of temporal and spiritual power, as articulated long ago by Emperor Justinian or Patriarch Photius. That language re-emerged in many places, but Symphonia was too often a cover for church subordination to state authority, even when Tsarist authority in 1721, for example, asked for more for Caesar for purposes of state security, than what was allowed for God. This book’s focus on 1989-2012 presents a shifting away from, or major modification of the notion, given the totalist challenges of preceding times, and the diverse geographic settings when including Eastern and Oriental churches--the fact of over 50% of Orthodox Christianity living in Muslim dominated areas, often for centuries, renders the Symphonia model more impossible, than a future hope. In Leunstean’s helpful summary, he remarks that “most churches claim that the concept does not fully represent their approach to contemporary social and political realities”, adding that the concept remain controversial because it “does not impose a clear distinction between religious and political leaders.” (p. 11)

Also more generally using Leunstean’s overview, where the major specific chapters addressing the post 1989 developments within Eurasia and eastern Europe (more indirectly globally) flesh out national details, the primary activities of Orthodox churches are examined under seven further topics: 1) theological education and publication (also media); 2) reemergence of monastic life; 3) “inter-ecclesiastical contact” at national and international levels; 4) relations with religious minorities as a proselytism problem; 5) relations with diaspora and migration - an issue placed near the top of the forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council’s agenda; 6) Orthodox Churches and the European Union; 7) The impact of secularism, nationalism and globalization.

On this latter point, the book’s organization ends with Part V, four thematic chapters on migration (Kristina Stoeckl), role of Greek Catholic Churches in Catholic-Orthodox relations (Thomas Bremer), secularism issues including human rights (Kristen Ghodsee), and globalization (Víctor Roudometof). The Stoeckl and Bremer chapters offer broad sketching out of the developments and issues, including how migration (less so outright mission) have also produced a globally dispersed Orthodox world, not easily captured under a “canonical territory” mindset. Bremer’s thorough review of the post 1989 Uniate problematic, is formulated to enable the reader to grasp central dilemmas for each of the three church groups--Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Greek-Catholic--making a return to some status quo ante no longer feasible. It could also be seen as a way of taking seriously the long developed separate formations of liturgy, prayers, and sense of “the true church” that laity have embodied, and make further ecumenical rapprochement about as problematic to think about, as relations with Protestants and the many worlds of indigenous Christianities around the globe.
Impossible to cover adequately in a brief review, here follow a few quotations from a few major chapters to whet the appetite to read further. The Russian Orthodox chapter (Zoe Knox & Anastasia Mitrofanova) approaches their task by showing “different internal currents in contemporary Orthodoxy” through describing the activities of clergy and laity. The focus on clergy shows “the diversity of opinion within church structures”, attention to laity reveals “the highly contested politics of popular Orthodox belief” (p.39) In fact the chapter draws on numerous major works to advance arguments on politics and religion (Papakova), stylize the achievements of Patriarch Aleksei II and Patriarch Kirill’s first years, especially the intentions behind new synodal departments, and a common policy since 1989 of “drawing church and society closer together” (p. 57). Here and in many other chapters, one would have expected authors to draw on a broader range of journal articles than they do. Klaus Buchenau’s closing remark that “currently the Serbian Orthodox Church no longer functions as a unifying factor among the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina” (p.87) force rethinking. Daniela Kalkandjieva’s chapter on Bulgarian Orthodoxy, with its persistence of competing synods draws attention to more recent revelations of collaboration of present church leadership with the Bulgarian security services to claim that the collaboration legacy from the communist years (an issue identified for most Eastern Orthodox churches) as well as the lack of transparency about church finances, caused her to wonder whether “the cure of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is in the hands of the laity”, still not well prepared for the task. (p.131) American readers in particular may find it helpful to read John Erickson and Alexei Krindatch’s chapter on Orthodox Churches in America, including fascinating charts on shifts in language for homily and liturgy. It is an update on progress toward a common Orthodox Church in America (the technical name for the Russian Orthodox parishes linked to the Russian Patriarchate) given the continuities of ethnic loyalties for the diaspora churches, many of which are key supporting bodies for mother churches in Europe and Asia. For the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America “over half of all the priests in these two jurisdictions entered the Orthodox Church as adults.” (p. 268) That is, converts, who “are present in all Orthodox jurisdictions”, plus there is a “rapidly growing proportion of intermarried families” (p. 269), a common feature of diaspora churches, evident in so many other sections of the book. Erica C. D. Hunter’s chapter (30) on the Assyrian Church of the East includes the line that because of two Gulf Wars the Christian population of Iraq in 2003 estimated at 1.3 million has dropped to 3-400,000, and “Christians account for an estimated 40% of all people fleeing Iraq to settle in diaspora communities” (p. 601), a 2012 statistic.