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**Book Review: Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections**

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# **Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections**

Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides and Elizabeth H. Prodromou (eds), *Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, \$60 hbk, 444 pp., ISBN 9780268101268.*

“Over the last two decades the American academy has engaged in a wide-ranging discourse on faith and learning, Christianity and higher education. Among the Christian voices that have weighed in on these topics, Orthodox Christians are not merely underrepresented; they are not even represented at all. This is not because no one has cared to listen but because scholars of the Orthodox tradition have rarely participated in these conversations” (p. 1). So begins the introduction to this significant book, the culmination of a decade-long conversation first initiated with the support of the Lilly Endowment’s Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation at Hellenic College. Truly, scholars of the Orthodox tradition have now joined the faith and learning conversation with passion and civility, to borrow a phrase from Parker Palmer.

This book reads like a collection of conference presentations, and at the outset I felt like I was eavesdropping on a conversation among Orthodox Christians who were involved in higher education, but who were outsiders because of their Orthodox faith. Thus, I was an outsider listening in on a conversation of outsiders. From the outset, I had to struggle to make sense of a host of names, events, organizations, and theological concepts and labels with which I had little or no familiarity. Yet, as I made my way through the volume, I appreciated and appropriated something important and useful from each and every chapter. Although the Orthodox tradition was unfamiliar to me, I kept finding the same issues, worries, and concerns that I have been discussing for the past twenty-five years. I am a Wesleyan, but the conversations among Eastern Orthodox scholars presented in this book regarding the mission of the university, the nature of the wisdom community, the tensions between church and university, and how to navigate as persons of faith in institutions and disciplines where faith is dismissed or altogether ignored were as familiar as an old friend. It was a remarkably fresh and insightful conversation, and I learned much from listening carefully about their own experiences.

First, it was helpful to listen to Christian scholars and recognize their pain as they reflected on their marginalization in higher education—marginalized not only by disciplinary colleagues and secular institutions, but by other Christians, too. Certainly, serving as a Christian scholar in a secular setting has its merits and its drawbacks. This book examines this struggle for relevance with grace and insight. Many Christian scholars will find courage and resolve in these chapters.

Second, it was helpful to listen to these Christian scholars and understand the joys and tensions of serving in a confessional college setting, particularly when not part of the dominant culture. The frustration with being ignored, or assumed to be a spokesperson for an entire branch of Christianity, was honestly shared. Again, many Christian scholars—like a Catholic professor who serves in a Protestant institution or a Mennonite who teaches in a Southern Baptist institution—will identify and take heart from this conversation.

And finally, a careful reading of this book will offer a thoughtful critique for those who serve in a confessional college as a member of the dominant theological culture, offering insights into the experience of those who come from other traditions, the sense of isolation they feel, and ways to be inclusive while still being faithful to the sponsoring denomination or faith community.

*Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education* is neither easy nor comfortable reading, but it is interesting, insightful, scholarly, and helpful. I recommend it to any Christian who currently serves in higher education in any context, or who feels called to prepare to do so. At the end of the day, what I appreciate most about this book is that it affirms the vocation of a Christian scholar, regardless of the setting for that service. As Scott Cairns writes, “The future isn’t written yet, and a great deal is riding on how fully or how poorly we—through our vocations—become like Christ. Get busy” (p. 385). This book will help us all get busy, and to do so with a deeper awareness of the challenges we face and an appreciation for the blessings of serving as Christian scholars in a watching world.

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