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B O O K  R E V I E W S


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For about 20 years, the discussion about human rights has been at the center of the social thinking of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). This search for a theological and social positioning reached a preliminary summit in 2008 with the official document “The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights.“ Christentum und Menschenrechte in Europa: Perspektiven und Debatten in Ost und West, an extended collection of contributions to an international conference in 2010, offers a thorough discussion of the issue. After the institutional and theological classification of the ROC document, analytical commentaries from the perspective of Protestant and Catholic theology, as well as cultural philosophy, follow. There are concrete applications from the pastoral and political practice of the ROC, as well as some illuminating comparisons with other Christian confessions. The contributions are framed by a detailed introduction in the beginning and a fundamental overview of the foundations of human rights at the end. This review that follows focuses on the contributions that explicitly deal with the Eastern European discourse.

In the first chapter, Kristina Stoeckl looks at the institutional context and ideological background of the human rights document from 2008. She shows the dynamics of the Russian Orthodox official discourse on human rights since the late
1990s, beginning with “The Basic Teachings" from 2008 that are based on the fundamental “Bases of the Social Concept“ from 2000, several official conferences, as well as speeches by Patriarch Kirill I and other hierarchs of the church. Within these statements the ideological dynamics become more obvious. Stoeckl shows the gradual opening of the position from “war against militant atheism” in the late 1990s to the wish to strengthen Christian humanity within the global engagement for human rights in 2008. The author explains this turn with the political strategy of the church hierarchy, which is mostly linked to a particular church agenda in international affairs rather than an instrumentalization by the state. On the other hand, the dynamics within the documents indicate the controversy between liberal and conservative forces within the church, although – according to the author – Patriarch Kirill I could have resolved this struggle for power to his advantage by now.

Cyril Hovorun, Russian orthodox priest and co-author of the human rights document of the ROC, manages to show the theological core of the document besides its political and social dimensions. He emphasizes “the vision behind it […] to develop a hermeneutics of the concept of human rights from the point of view of Orthodox theology” (46). He concisely explains the two main theological distinctions between human dignity and the dignity of human life on the one hand, and freedom as capacity of choice and freedom as liberation from sin on the other. Hovorun points out the consequential crucial meaning of the dimension of sin and morality. In answer to the severe critiques from western churches, Hovorun stresses that Russian Orthodox theology does not question the universal character of human rights but endows the “the notion of human rights with a necessary moral dimension” (48). From the ROC perspective,
without this moral dimension the very notion of human rights remains without meaning and purpose.

In her contribution, Jennifer Wasmuth embeds the document on human rights within the more general context of the social conception of the ROC. She briefly describes the concept of human rights according to the Bases of the Social Conception from 2000 and in the Basic Teaching on human rights from 2008, and shows the continuing development since then. In a critical statement, she sheds light on three main problems within this concept: First both documents miss a “differentiated social-ethical reflection” (55), cutting human rights short as a code for a system of secular values. Second, they ignore the long-standing discourse on human rights within the ecumenical movement with explicit Orthodox participation and within the international academic context. And finally, the ROC entangles itself in contradictions when it takes advantage of human rights for its own favor but simultaneously questions their universal claim. In contrast to Stoeckl, for Wasmuth the original target group of both documents has to be located within the church, so they can be described as a “kind of social preaching” (55). Wasmuth’s argument could be challenged by looking at the poor attempts of the ROC to transfer the documents to the parishes and support the discourse about it within the church.

The following three contributions are devoted to the reactions to the human rights document from the German Protestant (Stefan Tobler) and Catholic (Rudolf Uertz) Churches as well as from the cultural philosophy (Regula M. Zwahlen). Tobler draws on the well-documented discussion between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (GEKE) and the ROC about the document, and analyzes the differences between
the Protestant and Russian Orthodox positions. It becomes clear the two positions are not incompatible, however mutual understanding requires the willingness of both sides to be open for dialogue. In his strong warning for the protection of individual freedom against state attacks, Tobler makes clear the crucial problem of the Russian Orthodox position. Uertz, on the other hand, assumes broad agreement between Protestant and Catholic social ethics in contrast to the Russian-Orthodox position. The theological reason for this fundamental difference Uertz locates in the doctrine of the original sin. With a somewhat generalizing approach, he attributes to Orthodoxy a fundamentally pessimistic view of the human being, which in his argument harmonizes exclusively with the symphonic proximity of the state and the church, and this in turn with a religious homogenous community. However, Uertz points out that the important Orthodox idea of Christian personalism, which was represented especially by Russian religious philosophers, could significantly enrich the Orthodox human rights discourse. Unfortunately, this resource has not been used by ROC so far. As Zwahlen finally shows, the ROC not only marginalizes its own philosophical resources, but also the theological and philosophical processes in the West. With its focus on moral duties rather than human rights and freedoms, the ROC continues the old and ongoing European search for a balance between individual and collective values. It ignores, however, the Enlightenment paradigm of the "human being as a responsible subject" (88), the cultural philosophical discourse about the limitation of the human rights catalog as a counterpart to cultural relativism, and the "consensus-oriented dimension in the history of human rights" (97). Zwahlen interprets this silence as an indication that the ROC has less interest in a real normative approach to the human rights idea, but rather follows a (church) political strategy of delimitation ad
extra and consolidation ad intra.

Finally, the contributions of Alfons Bruening and Katja Richters turn our attention to practical aspects. Bruening gives insight into Russian Orthodox human rights activism, sketching the life of two priests, Father Pavel Adel'gejm (1938-2013) and Father Veniamin Novik (1946-2010). These impressive examples overcome the current obvious conflict between ROC hierarchy and Russian human rights movement on a practical level. Bruening distinguishes three generations of priests (Soviet religious dissidents, the intellectual opposition in the late 1980s, and post-Soviet priests) and illustrates the first two generations with the activism of the previously mentioned priests. He thus characterizes these generations as representing a theological reasoned belief in rights as an objectively binding fact. Doing so, he illustrates the contradiction between the so-called Russian legal tradition of “rights by grace.” According to Bruening, they show that the supposed opposition to the invulnerable rights of the individual and the collective relatedness of the person is not surmountable. Unfortunately, Bruening does not give an example for the third generation of priests after the breakdown of communism. It seems, that especially in the course of political protests since 2011 there are more convincing characters, who without the experience of Soviet dissidentsvo, find theological reasons to participate in the struggle for human rights as individual rights.

Richters sheds light on the engagement of the ROC with the institutional structures of the European Union. Because the conflicts between traditional and liberal values as well as secular and religious principles become most evident in the context of European integration, positions of the ROC become more expressive. On the one hand, the ROC takes on the role of a speaker for all Christian and tradition-oriented residents of
Europe, thus struggling for the human right of freedom of conscience and religion against secular decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and by this accepting the legal authority of the court. On the other hand, decisions of the court concerning Russian cases of violating freedom of conscience are ignored by the Russian state and often criticized by the ROC. Richters supposes rather a cultural-ideological strategy behind the European activity of the ROC, rather than sincere acceptance of the political meaning of human rights.

The remaining texts concern the position on human rights by other confessions, and I will focus here on the two texts looking at other Middle-European countries--by Mihai-Dumitru Grigore on the Romanian Orthodox Church, and by Lukasz Faifer on the Catholic Church in Poland. They show, yet again, that the conflict line between acceptance and rejection of the idea of human rights does not run between Eastern and Western Europe or between Orthodox and western churches. For the predominantly Catholic Poland, Faifer points out how the Church became open to the idea of human rights after the end of communism, due to the influence of John Paul II. Nevertheless, in practical debates i.e. about reproductive medicine, sexual minorities or religious freedom, the church takes a quite conservative attitude, which would differ from the fundamentally positive approach of Vatican II. Faifer thus illustrates the diversity of the human rights discourse within the Catholic Church. Grigore explains the lack of a fundamental position on human rights by the Romanian Orthodox Church as similar to the one by the ROC. Further, he shows how, in matters of principle, the Romanian position is based on the official statements of the Moscow Patriarchate. But at the same time, in its reactions to practical questions, the church seeks a pragmatic attitude to human rights and adapts a
secular vocabulary. According to Grigore, this could be the result of the increasing marginalization in the secular European society, which makes Romanian Orthodoxy more open to enter a constructive dialogue. However, according to his judgment, one cannot say that the Romanian Orthodox Church has incorporated human rights. More likely, it is ambivalent to them and uses this issue unsystematically according to its (political) needs.

I would like to mention two aspects, which do not occur as a defect to this excellent book, but nevertheless seem indispensable for the further study of the subject. First, it is striking that only one contribution out of thirteen comes from the Russian context itself and thus represents the genuinely Russian or Russian-Orthodox perspective among the choir of Western scholars. Despite the unquestionable scientific level of the contributions on the position of the ROC and their fair balance in the judgment, a greater proportion of Russian and/or Orthodox authors would be a tribute to a more equal discourse on the Russian Orthodox position. Second, to complement the perspective on the diversity and contradictions of Christian human rights discourse in West and East, a look at the current Western European movements for so-called "traditional values," as well as the diversity within Russian Orthodoxy and world Orthodoxy could be instructive. Both aspects could also take account of the fact that more than the church office statements shape the current relationship between Christianity and human rights - a reference to this is given by Bruening’s contribution.

Beyond this necessary widening of its scope, the current book undoubtedly makes gains for mutual understanding in human rights discourse. The articles presented provide comprehensive insight into the Russian Orthodox position. The Western responses to the
ROC documents allow for a critical classification and point to the difficulties of communication, which hinder a constructive dialogue with the ROC on the understanding of human rights and – in some cases even more important – prevent a common Christian commitment to these human rights. The comparative perspectives on Poland and Romania are important indications of the heterogeneity of the positions within the Western and Orthodox churches, themselves. The book contributes to a sensitizing of the differences and similarities in Christian human rights discourse in West and East. It brings together contributions from outstanding experts in a concise manner, providing a multi-layered introduction to both the widely discussed ROC documents, as well as the positions of Western churches in a single volume. It is undoubtedly an indispensable reading for all those who want to get a differentiated picture of Christian human rights discourse in East and West beyond the usual stereotypes of the liberal West and the traditionalist East.