

4-2018

## Book Review: God, Hierarchy, and Power: Orthodox Theologies of Authority from Byzantium.

James R. Payton  
*Redeemer University College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Payton, James R. (2018) "Book Review: God, Hierarchy, and Power: Orthodox Theologies of Authority from Byzantium.," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

## BOOK REVIEW

**Ashley M. Purpura, *God, Hierarchy, and Power: Orthodox Theologies of Authority from Byzantium*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. 226 pages. \$65.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-8232-7837-4.**

Reviewed by James R. Payton, Jr., Professor Emeritus of History, Redeemer University College

This book is a reworking of the author's 2014 doctoral dissertation on the history of Christianity at Fordham University. It deals with intriguing questions about hierarchy as a theological ideal in Orthodoxy and the ways that ideal was understood and interpreted by leading figures during the Byzantine era, as they dealt with problems and failures in the way hierarchy actually functioned. The author draws attention to problems she perceives in the way hierarchy has been embraced and practiced within Orthodoxy and urges, among other items, that the common Orthodox practice of excluding women from priestly or episcopal office cannot be readily defended from the writings of the historic Orthodox spokespersons whom she studies in this work.

The author explores the writings of four significant thinkers across a wide expanse of time, beginning with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (in the fifth or sixth century), continuing with Maximus the Confessor (seventh century), then considering Niketas Stethatas (eleventh century), and culminating with Nicholas Cabasilas (fourteenth century). Over the nine centuries between the first and the last of these, both civil and church experiences in Byzantium faced significant challenges which inevitably shaped the contexts in which these authors wrote and to which they responded. The author demonstrates continuities in concern and emphasis among them while acknowledging diversity in focus as they addressed the situations of their respective contexts.

The result is a stimulating historical-theological examination of how hierarchy was viewed by the few Orthodox scholars who addressed the issue during the Byzantine era. The volume offers a valuable contribution to scholarship on Orthodoxy, in general, and on these historical figures, in particular. Readers interested in any of them, the history of theology more broadly, or ecclesiastical hierarchy will find this volume stimulating. It will also be appreciated by those who seek significant changes in how and by whom hierarchy within Orthodoxy is populated, since the author urges, based on her readings of implications of some of the texts she examines, that gender should not be a consideration for becoming a member of that hierarchy. Those who abide by the expectation that hierarchy is restricted to males will not find enough here to force a serious reconsideration and, presumably, will not pay as much attention to this work as it otherwise deserves.

The treatment of the four Byzantine-era scholars offers valuable contributions to the corpus of scholarship on them. Dr. Purpura shows solid familiarity with the secondary literature on each of them as she expounds what they had to say about hierarchy. It could be wished that she had devoted more attention to the specific situations each of them encountered which shaped their concerns as they wrote, since the treatment given to this in each case is sparse enough that a reader who is not well-acquainted with Byzantine history will likely not discern the significance of those situations for the specific ways the respective figures dealt with hierarchy. But her treatment of the contributions of each scholar is insightful. She builds a solid case for the way she understands hierarchy as an ideal within and for the church. Regrettably, her approach to doing this gets in the way of making her point as clearly and effectively as she might have done, in two regards.

First, in her introduction, she gives special attention to “power theory” as it has been expounded by Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. This variety of critical theory relates to the author’s project, undoubtedly. But when she goes on to expound the views of the Byzantine authors on whom she focuses, and when she elaborates on the power associated with the ideal of hierarchy they set forth, that “power” is turned on its head. While it is undoubtedly true that hierarchy as her authors encountered it, and as Orthodoxy has often enough experienced it, could fit well within the assessments of the four power theorists she discussed in the introduction, she hardly touches on that in subsequent chapters. And in those chapters, when she lays out the ideal of hierarchy as expounded in their diverse ways by the Byzantine scholars she studies, she rightly stresses that this “power” is a self-denying and self-giving service, rather than domination or manipulation. In that exposition, she argues that the shared approach to hierarchy among these Byzantine scholars (and for the Orthodoxy she seeks to address) builds upon the divine dynamic in dealing with humanity, in which the Son of God laid aside the free exercise of the all-embracing power of God and became human, enduring all that happened to him, including self-giving death for humankind, so as to bring them to life through his resurrection. It is perplexing that she does not particularly engage at these points, or in the conclusion, with how this view of hierarchy subverts the claims of the power theorists and moves in a quite different direction than they posit.

Secondly, the way in which she deals with and describes hierarchy leaves much to be desired. The members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy have the privilege and responsibility to proclaim the Christian message, administer the sacraments, and be pastorally attuned to the laity (or others in the hierarchy) whom they serve, all in the desire to help them grow in likeness to God—in theosis, deification, or divinization, terms Orthodoxy commonly use to describe growth

in the salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ. Dr. Purpura rarely mentions that proclamation, touches only lightly on the sacraments, and hardly mentions such pastoral care. That is, by all accounts, odd—and hardly likely to attract encomia from Orthodox readers. When she declares, “God establishes the hierarchy as the authentic communication of God in the world” (p. 31), it sounds like she is confusing the means with the end. Her penchant for coining her own terms—the frequent description of the purpose of the hierarchy as “divine reflectivity” or to be “divinely communicative”—allows her to put her own stamp on the hierarchy, but these neologisms come off as either vapid or superficial when one considers that they are dealing with deification.