2-2007

Knox's "Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism" - Book Review

Scott M. Kenworthy

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol27/iss1/8

This Article 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 administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
was never a purely European phenomenon. The way that European Christianity came to think about itself is not normative for Christianity as a whole. The papacy’s self-image was not developed in agreement with the whole Church but in the relative isolation imposed by the barbarian invasions of Western Europe. This self-image separated Rome not only from Christians in the East but also from its own late-Antique heritage. Christians who remained outside of “Christendom” developed other ways of thinking about freedom in the Church in which no bishop, however revered and important as a symbol of unity, is above or apart from the Christian community as an authority circumscribing freedom within the community. If "the Church" wishes again to be the soul of Europe, it must first return to its own first principles of love and unity and equality.

Vatican II sought to do more than find a place for “the Church in the modern world” (Gaudium et spes), the conciliar document Luxmoore and Babiuch cite most frequently. It also sought to find new ways of thinking about the Church itself (e.g., in Lumen gentium). In particular, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum concilium), which is not cited by the authors, attempted to effect a diffusion of power in the Church among territorial conferences of bishops. But while the popes since the council have tried to present a face of repentance, humility and solidarity to the outside world, within the Church they have pursued an unprecedented consolidation of power. From Humanae vitae’s regulation of the marriage bed to Liturgiam authenticam’s attempt to deny the competence of territorial conferences of bishops in matters of liturgical translation, within the Roman Church “conservative paternalism” is alive and well. Is it any wonder that those outside the Church would be reluctant to play along?

Walter D. Ray, Assistant Professor & Political Papers Archivist, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.


Zoe Knox’s Russian Society and the Orthodox Church is the first major English-language monograph to analyze the relationship of Russian Orthodoxy to democracy in the
first post-Soviet decade. The book argues first that the Orthodox Church must be taken seriously as an important social actor in post-Soviet Russia. Second, Knox argues that the role of Orthodoxy cannot be reduced simply to a negative, xenophobic, anti-democratic one. Rather, one must distinguish between different currents within the Church, namely the “official Church” (the Moscow Patriarchate) and the “unofficial Church,” or liberal and reformist elements of clergy and laity. In this way, it becomes evident that Orthodoxy’s impact is both complex and contradictory: while the “official Church” has obstructed civil society, the “unofficial Church” has contributed to its development.

Central to the argument of the book is the notion of civil society, which the author defines as the sphere of voluntary associations that are distinct from the state and a necessary element for the development of a liberal democratic polity with protection and tolerance for diversity and pluralism. She argues that “Civil society, with its emphasis on individual interests competing for influence in a pluralist sphere of associations, is based on the individual” and thus on Western notions of individualism (p. 159). From this vantage, Knox examines the Church’s role in three spheres of civil society: in the social and political sphere, in the religious sphere broadly speaking, and within the Church itself as an association.

In examining the Orthodox Church’s past, she argues that the “official Church” did not constitute a “separate sphere” in the Soviet Union and therefore did not contribute to the development of civil society because of Metropolitan Sergii’s “capitulation” in 1927 and the consequent control of the Church hierarchy by the Soviet regime for the remainder of the Soviet period. Religious dissent (especially in the post-Stalin period) did, however, contribute informally to the non-state sphere, and this tradition of dissent constitutes the Orthodox Church’s “usable past” in Knox’s estimation. In post-Soviet Russia, the dissidents became religious activists, advocating reform within the Church as well as civil rights and religious pluralism in Russian society, and thus continue to contribute to civil society.

With regard to the relationship of the institutional Church to the Russian state, the book points out that the Moscow Patriarchate has not formally tried to become a state church, and that it regards the Byzantine model of symphony between the Church and Imperial power as inappropriate in a modern, secular state. At the same time, the Church contends that it has a place in shaping decision-making on social issues. In demonstrating how the Church has become very influential in the political arena and has been granted special status and privileges by the Russian state (whether by the 1997 religion law or through special financial
Knox concludes that the Russian Orthodox Church has become a “pseudo-state church.” Moreover, the extent to which the separation of church and state diminishes, to that extent the Church leaves “the sphere of associations and enter[s] that of the state’s jurisdiction,” ceasing to be a part of civil society (p. 131).

Knox continues by arguing that Orthodoxy has played a central role in the post-Soviet debate about Russian identity. With the revival of extremist and anti-Semitic Russian nationalism in post-Soviet Russia, some of these “national chauvinists,” because of the popular resonance between Russian and Orthodox identities, have used Orthodoxy for political purposes to support their ideologies. While these attitudes are shared by some within the Church (she discusses Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods), Knox argues that this is not representative of the Church as a whole (reformist elements oppose such ideologies). While the Patriarchate does not support national chauvinist ideologies, Knox contends that it has not done enough to condemn them; therefore “Patriarch Aleksii has aligned the Church with rightist forces by allowing its appropriation by figures promoting antidemocratic ideologies” (p. 179). The Moscow Patriarchate has also hampered the development of religious pluralism (a central feature of civil society) by advocating the 1997 Law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, which denies full legal rights to “religious groups” (nontraditional religions registered for less than fifteen years), permitting them freedom of worship but limiting possibilities for proselytism. Finally, the Patriarchate even restricts diversity within the Church itself, as Knox contends that Aleksii is always “quick to discipline reformist elements” (p. 177), based on the examples of Lakunin and Kochetkov. In short, while Knox is clearly sympathetic to the dissident or reformist elements in the Russian Orthodox Church, her assessment is that the Moscow Patriarchate has primarily obstructed the development of civil society in Russia.

This book challenges those who would interpret the Russian Orthodox Church as a static, monolithic institution inclined to support anti-democratic tendencies, and this is Knox’s most significant contribution—yet she does not go far enough. To begin with, the “Church” in Orthodox ecclesiology is not the hierarchy, nor even the totality of the clergy, but the entire body of believers. Such distinction between “official” and “unofficial” is artificial and alien to an Orthodoxy understanding of the Church itself. Even if these categories are useful for analytical purposes, Knox’s analysis of these two groups, is too rigid and oversimplifies an even more complex situation. While she recognizes that the Patriarch
plays a mediating role between “traditionalists and reformists” (p. 163), she does not clearly elucidate who these “traditionalists” are. As Knox herself notes, during the Soviet period not only were there liberal dissidents who advocated human rights and democratization, but also dissidents who were nationalists or neo-Slavophiles. In the post-Soviet period those who were traditionalists or nationalists also become “activists” (as clergy and laity) within the Church. Such groups—which are probably even more numerous than the “reformists”—are no more or no less “activists,” “official,” or “unofficial,” than the liberal reformist clergy and laity. In short, there is no simple binary between an “official” Church that hampers civil society and an “unofficial” Church that promotes it. Rather, there are elements of laity, clergy, and even hierarchy—as in Russian society as a whole—which are traditionalist or reformist, patriotic or national chauvinist, authoritarian or liberal, in varying combinations.

These tendencies are at work with regard to both politics and ecclesiastical matters. Thus, “traditionalists” may be concerned with religious issues (defending Old Church Slavonic and the Julian calendar, for example), or even nationalist, without being “fundamentalist” or anti-Semitic. It is they who actively opposed Kochetkov’s activities, rather than the Patriarch, who tolerated them for years before disciplining the reformist priest. The Patriarch has in fact been quite tolerant of many reformist liberal clergy; in any event, Kochetkov and Iakunin are special cases rather than the norm. Thus Knox is probably most correct when she refers to the Patriarchate as playing a mediating role between these various tendencies, rather than identifying it with any one of them. This mediating role perhaps also explains what appears to be a weak response to nationalist ideologies that invoke Orthodoxy.

Another problematic aspect of Knox’s thesis is that she maintains that the Orthodox Church’s involvement in and influence on politics, its opposition to foreign proselytism, and its tendency to become a “pseudo-state church” amount to the Church hampering the development of civil society. Certainly religion is very influential in politics in the United States, the United Kingdom has a state church, and proselytism is prohibited in Greece—and yet few worry about the health of civil society or democracy in these states. The point is that political involvement or closeness to the state do not in themselves imply that a church is contrary to the development of civil society. Moreover, her argument that involvement in shaping policy means that the Church leaves the sphere of civil society and enters the jurisdiction of the state is contradictory; does this mean that human rights’ activists who advocate the passage of certain legislation also cease to be a part of civil society?
One of Knox's central arguments is that "the Patriarchate was highly visible in the campaign to limit the activities not only of traditional religions... but also of new religious movements, both indigenous and foreign" (p. 162), particularly in leading the campaign for restrictive religious legislation that led to the 1997 law. However, when actually discussing what surrounded the legislation, she was forced to admit several things that contradict this assessment: first, that the cultural insensitivity of foreign Protestant missionaries provoked the anti-American and anti-Protestant sentiments among Orthodox believers and clergy alike and contributed to widespread support for the restrictive legislation. Second, neither the Moscow Patriarchate nor the 1997 law sought to limit "traditional" religions (defined as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and some forms of Christianity); rather, they sought precisely to limit foreign missionaries. Third, representatives of other traditional religions in addition to the Moscow Patriarchate were in favor of restricting these foreign missionaries—"there were even complaints from Russian Baptists that foreign Baptists were 'stealing' their flocks" (p. 174). Finally, the law has in fact not been applied nearly as severely as Western commentators feared and therefore is not such a central issue. Far from seeking to limit the activities of traditional religions, the Orthodox Church has developed good relations with many (such as Islam in most regions of Russia).

Finally, there is the question of culture. Knox argues that culture cannot be a justification for traditional practices "that obstruct the development of democracy" (pp. 34-35). She is probably correct in stating that Orthodox culture, or Russian Orthodox culture in particular, are not predisposed to be anti-democratic. But she also states that "in the Orthodox tradition, the notion of the individual is a theme only in that it extols the sacrifice or the subordination of the individual for the common good" (p. 159). While it is certainly true that Orthodox cultures do not have a tradition of "individualism," at the same time there is a great emphasis on what might be called "personalism"—the absolute value of every human person. Knox neglects the development of these ideas in early twentieth-century Russia, including their political implications, in works such as Problems of Idealism and Vekhi. She also argues that "the individual spirit and bourgeois values that [Max] Weber identified as integral to Protestantism encourage the development of civil society. It is these values that are absent from traditional Orthodox conceptions of democracy and community" (159). If this is the case, then culture does matter. Moreover, this statement raises the question of whether our values of individualism, diversity, and religious pluralism are not specifically the product of
Western culture and historical experience; if so, perhaps it should not surprise us that not all Russians view them as being universal and absolute values as we do.

In short, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church* is an important book that highlights the significance of religion and the Orthodox Church in post-Soviet Russian politics and society. It argues persuasively that the Church can both contribute to and obstruct the development of civil society at the same time, because the Church itself is a diverse body. However, the argument suffers from oversimplifying this diversity into a binary opposition between the Church hierarchy and church activists. The book is also daring in addressing the influence of religious and cultural attitudes on political dynamics, though certainly more work remains to be done in order to understand modern Orthodox cultures.

*Scott M. Kenworthy, Miami University of Ohio*


Scholarship on religion in late imperial Russia has often been governed by certain assumptions: the presumed rift between the sacred and the secular; a causal relationship between urbanization and secularization; the decline of the Russian Orthodox Church; and perhaps most significantly, the seeming incompatibility of religiosity with modernity. This collection of essays, the result of a 2002 conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, questions these and other assumptions, focusing less on religious institutions and more on the experience of religion and “the sacred,” including transcendental emotion and expression independent from organized religion. Contrary to assumptions about modernity, these authors find in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia rapid growth in religious pilgrimage, religious conflict, and nonconformity among the masses, as well as growth in non-traditional spirituality, such as philosophy, mysticism, and emotion, often expressed in the arts. Underpinning these essays is a questioning of the definition of religion itself. The church, these authors demonstrate, was “only one of many locations of religious practice and discourse.” (p. 5) “Religion,” “belief,” “spirituality,” and “sacred” are neither synonymous nor self-evident categories. Nor are the concepts “secular” and “profane” necessarily antonyms. This blurring of boundaries is not new, yet its application to the