

## **Global Eastern Orthodoxy: Politics, Religion, and Human Rights.**

**Edited by Giuseppe Giordan and Siniša Zrinščak. Cham: Springer, 2020. Pp. 264. \$159.99 (cloth); \$159.99 (paper); \$119.00 (digital). ISBN: 9783030286866.**

Nadia Kornioti 

Associate Lecturer, School of Law, University of Central Lancashire–Cyprus  
Email: [nkornioti1@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:nkornioti1@uclan.ac.uk)

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For an institution that has formally existed for almost two millennia and has been directly involved in global affairs for most of that time, Orthodox Christianity<sup>1</sup> is remarkably marginal in research and academic dialogue, as both an institution and a political actor, especially when compared to its Western Christian counterparts—the Catholic Church and the myriad variations of Protestantism—and the two other religions that have been coexisting with Orthodox Christianity across the same geographies for centuries, Islam and Judaism. In that regard, *Global Eastern Orthodoxy: Politics, Religion, and Human Rights*, edited by Giuseppe Giordan and Siniša Zrinščak, is a welcome attempt to offer insights on the role of Eastern Orthodoxy in a globalized world, through a multidimensional, interdisciplinary perspective.

Giordan and Zrinščak have brought together theoretical arguments from various disciplines—sociology, political science, international relations, political theology—“to reflect on the need for overcoming binary categories, such as tradition/modernization, us/them, public/private, identity/plurality, religious teaching/secular human rights perspective” when discussing Christian Orthodoxy (2). Giordan and Zrinščak claim to reflect theoretically on these “antithetical categories,” by reconsidering the social scientific approaches usually employed in analyzing Eastern Orthodoxy, through the introduction of “interdisciplinary matrixes and approaches,” using theoretical, legal, and empirical data (2–3).

Religion—any religion—is a topic that sits constantly on the thin fence dividing the public and the political from the private and the personal. Religion, therefore, is by default a topic ridden with complexity, especially when one attempts to disentangle with clarity the relation between religion, politics, and human rights. The task is perhaps even more burdensome in the context of Orthodox Christianity, due to the multiple layers of sociopolitical elements and actors associated with the role of the Orthodox Church as an institution traditionally. In the twenty-first century, these interrelations are further complicated by

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *Orthodox Christianity* to emphasize the distinction from Orthodox Judaism, as confusion sometimes occurs. I use interchangeably the terms *orthodoxy* (unqualified) or *Eastern Orthodoxy* consistent with the book’s title and other similar terms.



the fact that the Orthodox Church in reality is constituted by a collection of ethnically/nationally defined institutions, which more often than not do not see eye to eye on most subjects. Hence, the undertaking of the editors and the contributors is not an easy one, and they have succeeded in showing to their readers the level of complexity involved in studying and analyzing the global role of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in an ever-globalizing world. The content of the book reflects the many different topics and theoretical and methodological approaches one can employ when studying different aspects of Eastern Orthodoxy today.

After an introduction by Giordan and Zrinščak, the book's eleven substantive chapters are organized into two parts. The essays in the first part engage with the theoretical sociopolitical perspectives of the book, touching on a plethora of issues concerning human rights, religion, and politics, across jurisdictions and denominations. Vasilios Makrides's introductory chapter to this section provides an excellent overview of the diversity of key issues that are relevant to the encounter of Orthodoxy with modernity. Makrides introduces key concepts, such as the theological notion of "Orthodox personalism" and the "cultural idiosyncrasy" of the Orthodox Church, which "distinguishes it from the Western Latin Christianity" (16), before proceeding with a "comparative civilizational analysis" of the two (17). In this process, he illustrates the cultural differences between the two, successfully linking his theoretical discussion with consideration of the practical difficulties the Orthodox Church faces in accepting and applying modern human rights principles. In doing so, he offers concrete examples of the differences across the bodies of the Orthodox Church, such as the outright rejection of so-called Western human rights principles by the Russian Patriarchate in Moscow and the more cautionary stance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (26–28).

Makrides's highly informative chapter is the foundation for the case studies that follow. Kathy Rousselet gives an overview of the "Russian imaginaire" in world politics and the employment of Russian religious diplomacy in that regard over the last twenty years. Kristina Stoeckl offers a broader historical analysis on the Russian Church and human rights, from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the new Human Rights Doctrine of the Russian Church, introduced in 2008. She argues that the Russian Church has become a "moral norm entrepreneur" (71), which uses the language of human rights in pursuit of its own conservative agenda. Emmanuel Clapsis gives a glimpse of the transnational architecture of the Orthodox Church—something rarely, if ever, discussed with the respective national congregations—by analyzing the political dynamics of the Great and Holy Council, which took place in Crete in 2016. Against the background of the first such gathering of the Orthodox leadership to take place in centuries, Clapsis raises issues pertaining to the church's engagement with the public sphere, its intervention in politics, and the urgent need for the church to review its practices in various aspects, including issues of war and peace.

Effie Fokas discusses the plethora of questions at the intersection of human rights and religion in Greece, where orthodoxy is directly relevant to national identity (and this discussion is complemented by the rich historical background introduced by Eleni Tseligka in the last chapter of the book). Based on the extensive case law of the European Court of Human Rights, where Greece was the first country to be found guilty of a violation of religious freedom, Fokas delineates how national legislation can directly or indirectly support one religion to the detriment of another, how it can set the parameters that facilitate or preclude cross-religious social dialogue, and how it raises challenges for citizens with access to a plurality of jurisdictions, such as the case of Sharia Law for Greece's Turkish minority in the Western Thrace region (117). Olga Breskaya and Silviu Rogobete offer an empirical comparative analysis of perceptions on religious freedom among youth in Belarus and Romania, against the background of educational policy in public schools. Georgios

Trantas investigates the “soft power” and diplomacy exercised by the Cyprus Orthodox Church, following the Cyprus Republic’s entry to the European Union in 2004 (154). He uses the notion of “religiocultural heritage” to show the links between identity, cultural heritage and religion at the nexus of Christianity as an integral element of European identity (153).

Though most of the contributors to this section of the book hint at the adverse role the Orthodox Church may play in entrenching the inequalities among diverse social groups, with the support of analogous policies and legislation, few take the opportunity to engage critically with the topic. Nevertheless, the authors noted above employ a variety of theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary approaches, each citing a plethora of sources. This section of the book is thus an excellent starting point for anyone interested in an overview of the breadth of sociopolitical issues that derive from centuries-long power struggles and identity politics characteristic of the Orthodox Church and the depth of divisions that cut across “the historical Orthodox heartlands” (32–33) of Eastern Europe. Many of the alternative methodological approaches suggested could find their way into future projects engaging with similar topics across national Church jurisdictions.

The second part of the volume is focused more directly on issues of identity in the Orthodox diaspora. It features three case studies: a study of contemporary Orthodox Christian Churches in the United States by Alexei Krindatch, a study of the diasporic Romanian Orthodox Church in Italy by Marco Gugliemi, and a study of the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in sustaining the communal life of the Greek diaspora in Germany by Eleni Tseligka. Each of these authors gives historical background relevant to each case, and, notably, despite their expected differences in approach, they each offer insights on how the communities built around the Orthodox Church(es) in the diaspora interact with local converts, a group of Orthodox Christians that is rather marginalized in mainstream public discussions on religion in predominantly Orthodox states.

As does the first part of the book, this section also has an introductory chapter: Maria Hämmerli describes the ongoing process of the globalization of the Orthodox Church and its “indigenization” (177) in the West during the twentieth century. According to Hämmerli, over the past century, the Orthodox Church “rediscovered and reasserted its universality” and overcame its “confine[ment] to specific geographical, cultural and national territories” that precluded extensive missionary activities—the confinement perpetuated by the control exercised by the Ottoman Empire, authoritative tsars, and communist regimes (176). Though such observations are not wrong, Hämmerli fails to recognize that such narratives of Orthodox Christian victimization have played a role in the promotion of national agendas, including, in recent years, the establishment of a hostile environment toward minority and migrant groups. It is here that my main critique to the book is most relevant.

As already mentioned, Giordan and Zrinščak have assembled a rich collection of essays addressing cross-cutting issues relevant to the global position of Eastern Orthodoxy today. The authors successfully illustrate the disagreements and the antagonism between the Orthodox Church’s main protagonists, primarily the Russian and the Ecumenical Patriarchates, and its position(s) toward human rights, modernity, and the West. They discuss the Orthodox Church’s interaction with concepts of civilization, tradition, and culture and, by extension its instrumental but cautionary approach to globalization and diplomacy and its association with national minorities and diaspora communities. Missing, however, is engagement with Orthodox Christianity in the non-European, non-Western world, which undercuts the claim of a global approach implicit in the title.

Giordan and Zrinščak could have offered contributions that engaged with Orthodox Christianity in the non-European world through various perspectives. Among these might be the historical development of Orthodox Communities on the Asian and African continents and their relevance today: for instance, the ancient roots of Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia, which are little known even in the Christian Orthodox world. Another line of

discussion, which could have been worked into some of the existing essays of the book, concerns the missionary work of the Church of Cyprus and the Church of Greece in Africa in the mid-twentieth century. A third issue of paramount importance today is the position of the Orthodox Church(es), toward the extensive migration flows from Africa and Asia to Europe, which are often perceived and communicated to the public (by at least some leaders of the Orthodox Church) as an existential threat to what they call Europe's "integral Christianity." Consideration of each of these topics would be valuable contributions to either of the two parts of the volume, giving it a truly global outlook without understating critical aspects of the politics of the Orthodox Church domestically and internationally.

As an international lawyer with a keen interest in social group dynamics and their impact on domestic, transnational, and international public policy, I cannot but recognize in the above omissions the Eurocentric bias increasingly called out by many scholars. Moreover, as someone who studies the past and present of the Eastern Mediterranean and Southeast Europe, I must stress that this is more than just an academic criticism. The practical relevance of the Christian Orthodox religion as discussed in the contributions of Stoeckl, Fokas, Breskaya and Rogobete, Trentas, and Tseligka and the practical relevance of religion broadly speaking has constant influence on public policy, social dialogue, and historical memory—a result of Christian Orthodoxy being so closely integrated with not only identity (Hämmerli) but also human rights and politics (Makrides).

Lastly, whereas Giordan and Zrinščak provide a strong introduction, promising an interdisciplinary, multidimensional study of Orthodoxy (which to a significant extent it delivers) the dynamism observed at the beginning seems to wane as the book progresses. This effect could have been mitigated with a concluding chapter to remind the reader of the book's initial aims, tie up loose ends, and introduce reflections on future research topics (the latter another opportunity to include some of the topics omitted). As currently structured, the volume reaches a rather abrupt ending.

Understanding the positions and practices of the Orthodox Church globally is a matter of urgency for global affairs, as experienced in recent years by the conflict of the Ecumenical and the Russian Patriarchates over the recognition of the autocephalous status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (4). This conflict within the ranks of the Orthodox Church, which has been running in parallel to the growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine and intensified further in the two years preceding the current armed conflict between the two states, is a clear example of the historically political role of the Orthodox Church. But it is also an indication that, despite its shortcomings, timing of the publication of *Global Eastern Orthodoxy: Politics, Religion, and Human Rights* is especially good, as it so usefully serves as a starting point in the study of various aspects of the law and politics of the Orthodox Church in Europe and the United States.