

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHRISTIANITY

Edited by Joel Robbins

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Eastern Christians in  
Anthropological  
Perspective

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Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz



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## Epilogue

### Ex Oriente Lux, Once Again

Douglas Rogers

*Ex Oriente lux* ("From the East comes light") is the title of an oft-cited poem by the late nineteenth-century Russian Slavophile philosopher V.S. Solovyov. The poem, written in 1890, envisioned a special role for Holy Russia in the reunification of a Christendom that had been divided for close to a millennium:

And a light shone from the East  
 And heralded and promised  
 What had been impossible.  
 .....  
 That light from the East  
 Reconciled East and West.

Nearly a century later, Jaroslav Pelikan introduced *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, the second volume in his magisterial series on the history of Christian doctrine, with reflections on the phrase *ex Oriente lux* (1974: 1-7). Pelikan's series remains one of the few studies of Christianity written in the West to incorporate the churches of the Orthodox East effectively and comprehensively into its understanding of Christian history and theology. The old phrase *ex Oriente lux* deserves mention in the pages of the present volume as well, for the collective project its authors are engaged in is, in an important sense, heir to the intellectual labors of both Solovyov and Pelikan. To be sure, this book is neither a call for Russia-led ecumenism nor a study of the development of doctrine. It does insist, however—along with too few others like it—that anthropological conversations about Christianity as a social, historical, and cultural formation are impoverished when they neglect the diverse experiences and manifestations of Eastern Christianity.

What we require is a unified analytic field, a set of ongoing conversations that move across and actively reflect upon the East-West divide in their efforts to understand the significance of Christianity in human social and cultural life, past and present. In this brief epilogue, I point to three particularly fruitful ways in which light from the East might illuminate new terrains for the anthropological study of Christianities and of religion more broadly.

#### CHRISTIAN SELVES AND PERSONS

One important strand of anthropological scholarship, dating almost to the discipline's origins, associates Christianity with the creation of more "modern" human beings—often glossed as bounded, inward-looking individuals. Marcel Mauss (1985) and Louis Dumont (1986), for instance, each had something to say about the emergence of these modern Christian selves; each, like Max Weber before him, accorded special attention to variants of Protestant Christianity in his analysis. More contemporary anthropologists have taken up this line of inquiry by following Christian missionaries as they sought to foster the growth of Christian notions of selfhood in European colonies and postcolonies. In this large and still-expanding body of literature, Christian missions have often been understood to be the leading edge of incorporation into the modern capitalist world system (esp. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Peter van der Veer, summing up an impressive collection dedicated to this phenomenon, writes that "it is under capitalism that the entrepreneurial bourgeois self with his urge for self-improvement becomes the bearer of modernity. . . . I would argue that both Catholic and Protestant missions carry this new conception of the self . . . to the rest of the world" (1996: 9). In one of the most innovative contributions to this strand of anthropological inquiry, Webb Keane (2007) has suggested that secular Western social scientists and Protestant missionaries often navigate a common set of dilemmas that spring from shared semiotic ideologies and assumptions about the nature of the material world.

Where should we place Eastern Christians in this conversation, aside from correcting the common slippage whereby Western Christianity has so often come to stand for Christianity as a whole? We might ask, along with Sergei Kan (1999) or Paul Werth (2001), what was different about Orthodox missions and their links to non-Western views of modernity and selfhood. We might also ask, along with Catherine Wanner (2007) or Mathijs Pelkmans and his collaborators (2009), what emerged from the intersection of postsocialist transformations and Western missionaries in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>1</sup> We might also consider whether the inclusion of Eastern Christians in our field of vision requires more substantial expansion of anthropological conversations about Christianity as they concern personhood and subjectivity; this is what some of the chapters of this volume suggest we might profitably do.

The chapters by Renée Hirschon and Alexander Agadjanian and Kathy Rousselet join long-running conversations about the differences between—and interactions of—a putatively Western (and Western Christian) "individualism" and an Eastern Orthodox emphasis on holistic and collectivist forms of personhood. Hirschon, specifically aligning herself with the mode of analysis employed by Dumont in his *Essays on Individualism*, suggests that the trend toward celebrating individual birthdays (and, concomitantly, away from spiritually and socially significant name days) is diagnostic of broader, deeper, more pervasively individualizing transformations in Greek society. Agadjanian and Rousselet make a somewhat different point for Russia, ranging widely over several religious domains to suggest that multiple varieties of individualism and collectivism combine at any given time; individuation is not, then, entirely new in Russian Orthodoxy, although it seems now to be emphasized to a greater extent than in the past.

Given the fact that one important thrust in the recent anthropological study of Christianity—especially that emerging from European colonial contexts—theorizes conversion from non-Christian religions to Christianity as the crucible par excellence for the creation of modern individuals, it is of considerable comparative interest that both of these chapters understand these processes to be unfolding without corresponding switches in religious affiliation or identification. On this score, the line of analysis pursued by both Hirschon and Agadjanian and Rousselet more closely resembles historical studies of the emergence of individualism in Reformation Europe than, for instance, the explorations of Christian conversion in the colonial encounter that, under the influence of Peter van der Veer (1996), Joel Robbins (2004), and others, have become so central in the anthropology of Christianity. In new studies of Eastern Christianity, that is, there may be room for productive reengagement with the early works of Mauss and Dumont.

A second group of chapters takes up broadly similar issues of Christian personhood and subjectivity but largely avoids the already heavily burdened and often ideological labels of "individual" and "collective." These chapters approach issues of personhood and subjectivity through careful ethnographies of the Orthodox sensorium: the world of icons, elaborate rituals, and liturgies that Christians—Western and Eastern—so often identify as distinctively Orthodox. Gabriel Hanganu's analysis of a rural Romanian Orthodox icon procession unites detailed ethnographic description with the theology and visual anthropology of the icon to suggest that icons have "cross-realm" biographies, biographies that are not fully appreciated in existing approaches to either icons or the "social life of things." Applying this approach to the icon of Saint Ana in a Romanian village yields the provocative suggestion that the varieties of human personhood envisioned and practiced in Eastern Orthodoxy occupy a midpoint between the individualism of Western Christianity and the "distributed" or "dividual" personhood often asserted to prevail in non- or pre-Christian areas of the world. In Sonja Luehrmann's

chapter, this brand of comparison between Orthodoxy and other religious traditions does not take place through her analysis alone. In present-day Marii El, she shows, the specificity of Orthodox icon veneration is a pressing concern for clergy and laypeople themselves: it must be constantly compared to and distinguished from both Protestant and pagan practices. Luehrmann shows that the diocese of Marii El positions itself in these debates by being much more lenient toward manifestations of pagan "idolatry" than toward Protestant "iconoclasm"—or, in other words, toward the deification of, rather than the rejection of, the material world.

Luehrmann carefully phrases the intervention she wishes to make in broader conversations in and beyond anthropology. Her claims about Marii El do not necessarily apply to Eastern Orthodoxy writ large, she suggests (although they are usefully seen as one chapter in the centuries-long struggles over images, icons, and the nature of the material world in Christianity). Her point is, rather, that the particular configuration of debates about the materialities and immaterialities of being a proper—that is, nonheretical—Christian person in Marii El raises important analytic questions about Christian practice that might be productively explored in other times and places as well. This strikes me as just the right tone for studies of Eastern Christianity to adopt as they seek to engage and transform the Western tilt in existing scholarship on the anthropology of Christianities. As the wide variety of explorations of Christian subjectivity and personhood in this volume amply attests, we are unlikely to arrive at an "essential" Eastern Christian notion of personhood that is not so diluted and abstracted as to account for the actual practice of precisely no one. Far better, as many of these chapters persuasively suggest and Luehrmann articulates most clearly, to point to particular configurations of Eastern Orthodox Christianity that reformulate broader debates and discussions at an analytic level, and, in this way, influence the shape of future scholarship. One desirable outcome of anthropological attention to Orthodox Christian persons and subjects might be, then, additional impetus to shift from our long-running emphasis on individualism in Western Christian contexts themselves.

#### THE POLITICS OF CHRISTIANITY

The chapters in this volume are also instructive for thinking about the intersection of Christianity and politics, whether we conceptualize politics in its classic manner as a domain of interactions and struggles among interest groups—"the state" among them—or, following Foucault's writings on power, as a diffuse array of disciplinary and discursive formations through which subjects are formed. Again, potentially significant shades of difference with Western Christianity emerge through careful ethnography based in the Christian East.

Alice Forbess's ethnography of an Orthodox convent most fully engages Foucault and his followers on the topics of Christianity, power, and subject-formation; her brand of analysis overlaps considerably with the chapters on Eastern Christian selfhood and personhood I have already highlighted. Forbess suggests that the monastic life she encountered in Romania was based less on following a specific monastic rule or submitting oneself to certain disciplines than on a broad range of loosely defined efforts to reunite oneself with God, to achieve the divinization written of by church fathers. These Orthodox nuns are guided on the path to Christian salvation less by adherence to doctrinal texts than by the pursuit of what Forbess, following Harvey Whitehouse, calls an "analogic" mode of religious knowledge transmission based on mystery and ultimate unknowability. Broadly similar instances of mysticism and analogic religious knowledge appear in other chapters of this book, from Naletova's "kenotic communities" in pilgrimage to Naumescu's study of monastic exorcisms in Ukraine. Taken together, these chapters suggest that some reorientation of the ways in which Christianity is implicated in fields of power and subject-formation is in order. As Michael Herzfeld (2004: 48) has also pointed out in his ethnography of Greek artisans and their apprentices, the techniques of Christian discipline that are so central to Talal Asad's masterful and influential *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) are often distinctively Western Christian in origin. They need to be expanded, and perhaps substantially rethought, if we are to apprehend correctly the relationships between Eastern Christianity and modes of power and domination, state-formation and subjectivity.

Christian churches have long been acknowledged to be important political actors in the more traditional sense of politics: church leaders speak and direct their followers to act on the national and international stage; they lend their moral authority to the legitimation of political and state agendas; and their members are often deeply engaged in very local struggles where there is no discernible dividing line between "religion" and "politics." On this score, too, the particularities of Eastern Orthodoxy are interesting and potentially instructive for anthropologists of Christianity. Again and again in these chapters, we find politically fraught encounters between and among Christian churches that are only understandable if we take into account Eastern Orthodoxy's particular brand of Christian unity: a family of autocephalous, largely self-governing, and nation-state-based churches, all of them "in communion" with each other but not overseen by a centralized authority on the model of the Roman Catholic Vatican. This flexible organizational structure persisted even in the former Soviet bloc, in a landscape with a bewildering variety of overlapping—and often contentious—boundaries among nations, states, ethnic groups, and Christian denominations. This complexity is, of course, nothing new to historical or social scientific studies of the region, but it has not yet been appreciated in the wider anthropology of Christianity and of religion.

Several chapters illustrate these dynamics. The fallout of the Estonian Church crisis of the early and mid-1990s—in which the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Patriarchate of Constantinople quarreled over which body had administrative authority over parishes in newly post-Soviet Estonia, eventually bringing the entire Eastern Orthodox Church to the brink of schism—forms the crucial backdrop for Jeffers Engelhardt's study of liturgical hymns in Estonia. Through careful attention to the singing style of *akathist* hymns, Engelhardt is able to show that the particular styles of singing at the Church of St. George in Setomaa, Estonia, continue to show the influence of the Petseri (Pechory) monastery, located across the border in the Russian Federation. In the local Orthodox liturgy, in other words, the Estonian-Russian border—still fraught, defended, and heavily ideologized in so many ways—is reimagined and subordinated to a broader Orthodox ethics of liturgical singing.

Melissa Caldwell explores a different dimension of the particularities of Eastern Orthodox political organization in her ethnography of social welfare and charitable organizations in Moscow. Russian Orthodox charity, Caldwell shows, is often caught between civic nationalism and religious nationalism. The close identification of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Russian state would appear to mandate the provision of social welfare resources to all citizens; yet, in practice, Russian Orthodox benevolent associations have been shifting to restrict assistance exclusively to Russian Orthodox believers. But the church is not safe from critique even on this territory: the common postsocialist indictment of the Russian state for failing to provide social services has rubbed off on the Russian Orthodox Church as well, and their representatives analogously criticized for failing to take care of their flocks. As Caldwell notes, this situation has much to do with the ongoing political and economic transformations of post-Soviet Russia. Read in the context of the anthropology of Christianity, it shows some of the entailments and consequences of the close association between state and church in Eastern Christian political/religious organization.

In Maria Couroucli's ethnography of popular Saint George's festivals on an island near Istanbul, we see with particular clarity that the political formations in which Eastern Christians participate extend beyond the nation-state to empire and its aftermath. Like Glenn Bowman's ethnography of Macedonian "mixed shrines," Couroucli's study reveals a range of symbolic and ritual ways in which contemporary Orthodox and Muslim communities interact and intertwine outside of—and sometimes in spite of—the official positions staked out by their respective religious authorities.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Couroucli places the present-day configurations of Orthodox-Muslim syncretism in the context of more than a century of large-scale political reconfigurations, for archival research demonstrates that such syncretisms are not new in Turkey. They extend back at least to the Ottoman period, when they also quietly challenged the official separation of religious communities

envisioned by the *millet* system. As Couroucli astutely notes, however, these practices should not be understood as simple continuities with an Ottoman past; rather, the high attendance at recent Saint George's festivals can be attributed in part to a new nostalgia for the imagined tolerance of the Ottoman empire, a nostalgia that is intimately connected to struggles over Turkey's efforts to establish a minority rights record that will speed entry into the European Union.

In sum, the chapters that focus their attention on the politics of the Eastern Churches reveal a Christian world aspiring to unity and cooperation among a family of coequal churches, but always caught up in shifting borders of state, nation, ethnic group, religion, and territory. (Complicating this matter further, of course, is the fact that careful ethnography shows that matters "on the ground" are often considerably more complicated than they are in the official church statements and pronouncements that guide many analyses.) This history of schisms and near schisms, and of moments of tolerance and intolerance, at the layered and constantly shifting boundaries of faith, nation-state, empire, and European supranationality might be productively mined for insights that Eastern Orthodoxy can contribute to the anthropological study of religion and politics more broadly. If studies based in the Western Christian world have been particularly useful for their treatments of individual conversion to Christianity—of people moving across religious boundaries—then perhaps the study of Eastern Christianity might be analogously instructive about a closely related but analytically distinct issue: the dilemmas and reconceptualizations that result from the movement of state, national, or imperial boundaries across communities of Christians (well illustrated here by the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and Estonia's declared independence from the Soviet Union). Once again, my aim is not to argue for the absolute distinctiveness of the Christian East, but for an appreciation of the ways in which its particularities—of political organization in this case—might reformulate research agendas and questions across the anthropology of Christianity.

#### CHRISTIAN HISTORIES

As the editors note in their introduction, a concern with historical continuity and unchanging tradition has long been a distinguishing feature of much Eastern Orthodox theology and even everyday discourse. This emphasis, they and several contributors note, stands in contrast to the emphasis on rupture and discontinuity that Joel Robbins (2007) rightly identifies in many Western Christian—largely Protestant—contexts. This mode of historical consciousness does seem to be very widespread in the Orthodox world: as Anna Poujeau's chapter on the revival of monasticism in the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch in Syria reminds us, Eastern Christian models of historical authenticity and roots in a remote past are to be found well outside Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless,

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