

Book Review

Orthodox Christianity in 21st Century Greece: the Role of Religion in Culture, Ethnicity and Politics, edited by Victor Roudometof and Vasilios N. Makrides. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, 258pp., £55, ISBN-10: 0754666964, ISBN-13: 978-0754666967.

In a noteworthy article (2006, p. 148) the political scientist Sabrina Ramet maintains: ‘Whatever changes may impact the world, the Orthodox Church refuses, for the most part, to accommodate itself to change, fixed in the past, its bishops’ gaze riveted on an “idyllic past” which serves as their beacon.’ Is Orthodoxy merely a religion which ‘looks on the tempests and is never shaken?’ The recent collective work under review here, edited by Victor Roudometof and Vasilios Makrides, would lead us to a more nuanced conclusion. The volume is devoted to Orthodox Christianity in Greece since 1990 and comprises ten articles, all of good quality, based on varied methodological approaches. It focuses on the years 1998–2008, when Christodoulos Paraskevaïdis – a controversial although charismatic and media-friendly prelate – was archbishop of Athens and all Greece. Hasn’t this cleric been described sometimes as a conservative, traditionalist, ultra-nationalist cleric, and sometimes as a reformer, a modernist and a pro-European leader?

The book is structured in two parts. The first one deals more especially with ‘Orthodoxy, ethnicity and politics’; the second part, which stresses the social, cultural, local dimensions, is entitled ‘Orthodox Christianity and Greek culture’.

The introduction is interesting though it comprises some repetitions and could with advantage have been more concise. It sets the book clearly within the scope of sciences of religion. The polarity tradition-modernity, a familiar problematic in the social study of Orthodox Christianity, remains the main question. It is addressed here with much subtlety.

In the first chapter Victor Roudometof presents Greek Orthodoxy in a historical perspective, from Ottoman times until the beginning of the twenty-first century and ‘globalisation’. The author follows a classical reading of history, which is perhaps a little idealistic: the transition from a universal-ecumenical church to the nationalisation and breakup of the institution. This process, which, for that all, represented a step towards ‘modernity’, led in Greece to the concept of ‘*ellinochristianismos*’ (‘Helleno-Christianity’), which stressed a tight association between Orthodoxy and national identity. While Christodoulos was archbishop, the Orthodox Church of Greece clung to this ideal as a response to globalisation.

In chapter 2 Tassos Anastassiadis looks at the phenomenon of ‘conservative modernisation’: a combination of a conservative/intolerant discourse with reformist practices. We might note that this expression, used by Wolfgang Reinhard, was taken

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up in the 1990s to characterise the Roman Catholic Church under John Paul II. Comparing the 1920s–1930s and the 1990s, the author focuses on two figures regarded as ‘reformers’: the archbishops of Athens in both periods. In a clear and relevant chapter Anastassiadis argues that within the Orthodox Church – a traditionalist institution – a reformer had better adopt a hard, conservative and uncompromising discourse which protects him against internal ultra-conservative currents. This article confirms the relevance of a parallel examination of discourse and practices. However, considering discourses mainly as a ‘cover’ or a ‘strategy’, the author seems to rule out the possibility of a cleric being sincerely traditionalist but adapting to circumstances – that is, to be multifaceted.

In chapter 3 Vasilios Makrides analyses the 2004–2005 crisis, when the Church of Greece was affected by a series of financial, judicial and moral scandals with large media coverage. This crisis enabled the conservative (New Democracy) government to reduce the pressure power and lobbying power of Archbishop Christodoulos, who had become a somewhat embarrassing ally. Makrides goes on to consider whether the crisis has accelerated the modernisation of the Church. His is an interesting but perhaps not entirely convincing argument, for no real evidence of structural change is brought up here.

In chapter 4 Dia Anagnostou and Ruby Gropas tackle a highly symbolic issue: the planned building of a mosque in Athens, the capital of a country where national ideas have tended to reject Islam as an absolute otherness. The article is based on the press and on parliamentary proceedings. It examines how the ‘new Islam’ – the result of recent immigration waves – is addressed by the country’s ecclesiastical and political elites. It points out that the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece – usually seen as the main resistance force – has officially accepted the prospect of a mosque in Athens: a prospect whose achievement, it is true, is still to come in 2012. The authors, with optimism, believe that in spite of obstacles of all sorts the first steps towards a ‘domestication’ and a full recognition of Islam in Greece have already been taken.

In chapter 5 Prodromos Iannas adopts a more legal approach. He specifies a series of issues more directly connected with religious minorities, whose situation is, according to the author, not yet completely ‘satisfying’: the identity cards controversy, religious education, proselytism, alternative military service, images of Jews and Muslims of Thrace. The author considers possible ways of improving this situation, referring to two principles: redistribution (to give more resources and opportunities to religious minority members as citizens) and recognition (a difference-affirming logic).

The very interesting chapter 6, by the socio-anthropologist Eleni Sotiriou, deals with the role of women in the Orthodox Church. The author relies on recent discourses of clerics, theologians and women who define themselves as ‘Orthodox’. She reminds us that the Orthodox Church of Greece is an institution where management, decision-making and responsibility positions are all controlled by male clerics; its bishops and theologians still maintain a conservative stand regarding the sensitive issue of women’s ordination to priesthood. Sotiriou stresses, in parallel, the outward weakness of Orthodox women’s claims: on women’s issues, they tend to adopt a position of acceptance, an essentially apologetical, anti-feminist, anti-western stance. And yet the author points out slow, timid but real changes on this matter: the reactivation, in 2004, of the old institution of deaconess attests to this. Meanwhile more and more theologians and even clerics admit that there is no dogmatic impediment to the ordination of women. As for Greek Orthodox women, if they observe the main religious rules and rites, they can infringe the prohibitions of the ecclesiastical authorities in what they regard as matters concerning their ‘private’ life

(abortion, *in vitro* fertilisation . . .). These points confirm that the Church of Greece is not cut off from the debates which have been flourishing within international Christian Churches and societies for several decades.

In chapter 7 Dimitris Antoniou relies on interviews carried out with a militant Old Calendarist in order to specify, in an ethnographic perspective, the conceptions and discourse of a fundamentalist current within the Orthodox Church of Greece. These representations, focused on the themes of conspiracy, sacrifice and martyrdom, throw light on the positions of Old Calendarists who stand in the front line of a 'resistance' against the (planned) mosque in Athens.

Chapter 8, by Effie Fokas, has a twofold interest. First, it looks into a field of strategic church activity which demonstrates how the church authorities today are emphasising their relationships with the state, Greek society and even the European institutions. Second, it centres on the Orthodox Diocese of Thiva and Livadeia, and in doing so illustrates how the Orthodox Church in Greece is basically a decentralised structure: the bulk of philanthropic activity goes on at the level of diocese or parish. Two points emerge from this field research. First, the Orthodox Church of Greece (partially) fills an important gap in welfare needs in Greece. Second, welfare is actually a domain of cooperation between the Orthodox Church and the state, especially at a local level. For Fokas, welfare represents both a 'continuation of tradition' and a 'new role' for the Church.

In chapter 9 Theoni Stathopoulou considers the issue of religious perceptions and practices within a comparative European framework. This chapter is based on European Social Surveys (opinion polls) and looks for possible 'Greek specificities'. Stathopoulou concludes that there are some special Greek features; but I think their importance should not be overestimated. Indeed, Greeks don't seem to go to church more often than other Europeans (they go less often, on average, than Roman Catholics). However, very few say that they never go to church, while a significant proportion – 20 to 25 per cent of those questioned – say that they are 'religious': two features which mark them out in comparison with other citizens of EU countries.

Lastly, chapter 10 is an interesting contribution by Lina Molokotos-Liederman devoted to the 'free monks' phenomenon: Free (*Eleftheroi*) is the name of a rock/pop band composed of young Orthodox monks who had notable success with young people in the early 2000s. Attached to the St Augustine and Serafim of Sarov Monastery, in central Greece, and to their elder, Fr Nektarios Moulatsiotis, these '*paparokades*' (rock priests) combine ultra-modern production and communication means with a relatively conservative and nationalist religious message. The author situates this rather new phenomenon in Greece in the wake of pop-rock faith-based music which developed in the USA in the late 1960s. She rightly points out the outward 'contradictions' of this movement, as regards both the tradition-modernity opposition and the band's claim to 'freedom', a freedom somewhat restrained by religious rules. The author calls for further research on religion, music and young people, an investigation field which most certainly would deserve development.

This series of articles sheds light on ongoing debates in a secularised society which, as a result of recent immigration, is rediscovering its multicultural dimension. Through all these texts, two main ideas seem to emerge. Beyond internal resistances and a fervent commitment to tradition – at first in discourse – the Orthodox Church is being affected by a rapidly changing environment and seems to be adapting, albeit in its own way. Besides, the whole book suggests that Orthodoxy in Greece, far from being a unified bloc, is crossed by many divides and currents. These changes, these possible tensions as regards religion, society and politics, echo back to those which

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have affected – and are still affecting – many other countries, whether of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Muslim ‘tradition’. As a consequence, this set of case studies enables us as much to specify the Greek particularities as to nuance strongly the thesis of an implacable ‘Greek exception’.

To conclude, this stimulating joint publication represents a valuable contribution to the social sciences of religion, as well as to the study of contemporary Greece and the Balkans. More importantly, perhaps, this book is revealing of clear ongoing changes in the study of religion in Greece. In a country where religious – and especially Orthodox – issues have for a long time been regarded as the ‘private domain’ of official church specialists, now a new generation of researchers has emerged. The latter, generally having an international education, have succeeded in avoiding both the apologetic and the polemical approaches which had prevailed until recently. These researchers have taken hold of the religious phenomenon with the distance and the rigour of social sciences, and the result is convincing.

Reference

- Ramet, S. (2006) ‘The way we were – and should be again? European Orthodox Churches and the “idyllic past”’, in T. Byrnes and P. Katzenstein (eds), *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

ISABELLE DÉPRET

Centre Interdisciplinaire d' Étude des Religions et de la Laïcité,

University of Brussels

isdepret@gmail.com

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2012.734466>

Notes on Contributor

Isabelle Dépret graduated from the Institut d'Études Politiques (Sciences-Po) and the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris, and has a PhD in history. She has been a researcher at the École Française d'Athènes and now works at the Centre Interdisciplinaire d' Étude des Religions et de la Laïcité at the University of Brussels. Her interests are the contemporary history of Greece and the Balkans and the connections between religion and politics in South-Eastern Europe, currently focusing on memorial issues, interdenominational relations and interactions between religions and politics in the Greek-Turkish cultural area, especially Thrace. Her recent publications: *Église orthodoxe et histoire en Grèce contemporaine: versions officielles et controverses historiographiques* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009), (with others) *La Grèce inconnue d'aujourd'hui: de l'autre côté du miroir* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2011), and *Religion, nation, citoyenneté: l'Église orthodoxe de Grèce et le conflit des cartes d'identité* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012).