

BOOK REVIEWS

***Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age*, edited by Hans-Peter Grosshans and Pantelis Kalaitzidis**

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Hans-Peter Grosshans and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, eds. 2023. *Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age*. Paderborn, Germany: Brill Schöningh

Politics, Society and Culture in Orthodox Theology in a Global Age, edited by Hans-Peter Grosshans and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, resulted from papers delivered “at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Volos, Greece, in February 2020” (x), and adds to a growing literature of contemporary Orthodox Christian political theology. As is the case of most edited volumes, the book’s theme loosely ties together otherwise disparate contributions. The book’s value, then, cannot be judged based on internal coherence or systematic exposition but whether any of the individual contributions make significant advancements in their fields. On that score, *Politics, Society and Culture* is a mixed bag.

If one is looking for historical contributions, there are chapters on Tsarist Russia (Brüning), the “Ottoman, Communist, and Post-Communist Contexts” (Merdjanova), and Russian religious philosophy (Wood). If one is looking for helpful summaries of modern Orthodox church-state relations in the Balkans, the book delivers, with chapters on Greece (Moschos), Romania (Turcescu), and Serbia (Sekulić), as well as a consideration of “ethnotheologies” (Kalaitzidis) and an overview that also includes discussion of Bulgaria (Slavov). If one is looking for more conceptual, philosophical and theological analysis, the chapters by Asproulis, Riboloff, Ventis, Kaminis, Pavlović, Papatthanasiou, and Bauer touch on these aspects to varying degrees. These categories are also loose—several chapters contain discussions that are historical, social-scientific, *and* conceptual.

On the positive side, Nathaniel Wood’s chapter offered the most insights for my own research, which focuses on Orthodox Christian social thought (i.e., Orthodox Christian political economy). Admittedly, I may have simply been happy to read any contemporary scholarship that considered S. L. Frank, not to mention putting his thought in dialogue with Vladimir Soloviev and Fr. Sergei Bulgakov. Soloviev (d. 1900) influenced the religious turn of intellectuals like Bulgakov and Frank in the Russian Silver Age in the early twentieth century. Bulgakov’s theology has received more attention in

the literature than his political, cultural, and economic work. But both he and Frank, a philosopher, contributed to *Vekhi*, a 1909 volume critiquing the atheism, materialism, and radical Marxism of the Russian intelligentsia at the time, garnering a flurry of responses and critiques, including one from Vladimir Lenin himself, who later exiled them from the USSR after the revolution. Frank continued his work in Orthodox social philosophy in several major works, but these works are rarely cited in Orthodox scholarship. Wood strikes a welcome balance between historical analysis and constructive appraisal, offering a helpful summary of Soloviev, Bulgakov, and Frank on deification, *sobornost'*, and democracy, and noting the influence of *sobornost'* on Western writers, such as John Milbank (35–40). While he does not directly address economic issues, his clear exposition of these thinkers' contributions facilitates anyone who might build on them to that end. Sveto Riboloff also deserves credit for at least mentioning economic liberty as a positive and desirable good for Eastern European nations (215). Selfishly, I was also encouraged to see Ina Merdjanova recommend Fr. Gregory Jensen's *The Cure for Consumerism*, part of a series on Orthodox Christian social thought, which I edited (27).

Unfortunately, ignorance of economic science is a shortfall of Orthodox political theology, and this volume is no exception. Of course, one should not conflate it with Orthodox social thought, but to the extent these disciplines intersect, which is often, readers will find very little awareness of the modern discipline of economics or, for that matter, the history of Orthodox teaching on questions of property, wealth, poverty, profit, trade, and so on. Indeed, there even seems to be an unexamined tension: Most authors regard liberal democracy as a good thing, but on the whole they are skeptical toward the market economy, which has historically been the economic component of the broader liberal project. Authors need not fully embrace it, but they should at least give good reason why liberal democracy is good but “neoliberalism” (a weasel word still too often used) is bad.

One reason for this confusion might stem from another negative aspect of the book: liberalism and liberal democracy are rarely defined. Historically there are many varieties of liberalism, and it may be that some liberalisms are more compatible with Orthodox Christianity than others. This problem comes to the fore in the many authors who seem to presume affirmation of LGBT perspectives is an essential component of liberal democracy. Some of these chapters would lead to the historically absurd conclusion that the United States, for example, wasn't really a liberal democracy until the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in 2015. That said, one notable exception to this trend is Atanas Slavov, who notes,

When some new claims to rights or status arise that are presented as modern and democratic (e.g., abortion, gay marriage), it is typical for Orthodox Churches to react against

them because these claims are seen to be contrary to certain core Christian values and doctrines. This, however, is not a reaction against democracy or fundamental human rights but rather an expression and exercise of the freedom of religion.... Moreover ... there is no popularly accepted negotiated compromise on some of these issues, and the public space remains open to challenging views represented by different civic, political or religious groups. (202)

As for the larger problem of ill-defined liberalism, Haralambos Ventis at least offers a more nuanced description, if not definition: “liberalism insists that, instead of new grand utopias, we need self-knowledge, realism, moderation, open-mindedness and compassion ... small minds and endless carnage usually hide behind ‘great ideas.’” He continues to argue that liberalism “should be considered a useful ally to faith and Christianity in particular ... due to the categorical distinction between God and Caesar raised by Christ Himself in the Gospels” (250). This cautious embrace of liberalism grounded in Christ’s teaching on God and Caesar in the Scriptures is welcome.

Last, I wish at least one chapter had considered in some detail the medieval republics of Novgorod (1136–1478) and Pskov (under Novgorod, 1136–1348; independent, 1348–1510). Democracy is not a purely Western import to Orthodox contexts. It has grown from Christian soil in both East and West. We Orthodox have our own, largely forgotten history with democracy that surely contains insights for the challenges of reconciling the Orthodox Church with our democratic contexts today.

These criticisms do not diminish the contributions of *Politics, Society and Culture*, but they do reveal certain blind spots that the discipline of Orthodox political theology still needs to address head on. For that, however, we’ll have to await another volume.

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