

7-2018

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H. David Baer
Texas Lutheran University

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Recommended Citation

Baer, H. David (2018) "Book Review: George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolou, eds. Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol38/iss3/8>

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BOOK REVIEWS

George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolou, eds. *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.

Reviewed by H. David Baer, Texas Lutheran University

This volume, which is part of a general series published by Fordham University Press called “Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought,” focuses on the relationship between Christianity and democracy. The book consists of essays originating in a conference sponsored by the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University. Individual essays are grouped into three distinct sections. The first deals with “The Post-Communist Situation,” the second with “Protestant-Catholic-Orthodox Conversations,” the third with “Historical Perspectives.” The book concludes with something like an epilogue written by Stanley Hauerwas.

The task of pulling conference presentations together into a book always presents distinct challenges for any set of editors. First, they must corral their presenters and steer them toward a common theme; second, they need to cajole their authors into revising the papers so as to ensure the book maintains a uniform quality. In the case of the present volume, the editors succeeded in meeting their second challenge better than the first. Although the essays, when viewed individually, are generally good, not all the authors expend serious effort engaging the Orthodox tradition, which tends to undermine the unity and coherence of the volume.

An essay by Mary Doak, for example, considers the proper Christian response to globalization, drawing upon a wide range of theological sources from Roman Catholic social teaching to John Milbank to Paul Tillich, but includes only a few superficial and immaterial references to the Orthodox tradition. Eric Gregory offers reflections on so-called Augustinian

liberalism (the topic of a book he wrote in 2008), which nods in the direction of Orthodoxy in its introductory paragraphs, but does not otherwise engage that tradition. Bryan Hehir offers a concise and edifying overview of the evolving Roman Catholic position on democracy from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, but the history Hehir tells does not refer to Orthodoxy. Stanley Hauerwas' somewhat autobiographical reflections on "How (Not) To Be a Political Theologian" include no Orthodox interlocutors and could just have easily have been written for a different volume (indeed, I had a vague sensation reading it that I had encountered this essay already, perhaps in the form of an address to the Society of Christian Ethics). One suspects that in planning the volume the editors wanted to secure contributions from scholars with name recognition. They might have been better served by contributions from less prominent scholars who have actually thought about Orthodoxy.

Even so, the essays in the book, including those only tangentially related to its theme, tend to be good quality, and thankfully quite a few of them do address the relationship between Orthodoxy and democracy. Western Christians committed to the ideal of liberal democracy, like the author of this review, are often prone to wondering whether the representatives of Orthodoxy we encounter are liberal interlocutors who share our commitment to democratic principles even when offering critique, or illiberal adversaries of democracy who would replace democratic regimes, if they could, with some alternative they believe better. Reading the book with this question in mind, one discovers a number of interesting and insightful essays.

The first essay, by Kristina Stoeckl, titled "Moral Argument in the Human Rights Debate of the Russian Orthodox Church," does a good job capturing the ambivalence concerning democracy within the Russian Orthodox Church. Stoeckl presents the Russian church as trying to find something like a "third way" between secular liberalism, on the one hand, and a complete

rejection of modern liberalism, on the other. The effort to stake out this middle ground, in Stoeckl's view, is inherently unstable. Stoeckl describes the approach of the Russian Orthodox Church to human rights as "acceptance-through-rejection," a strategy which consists of accepting human rights language in principle while rejecting human rights regulations in practice. To this reviewer the strategy sounds outright cynical, but Stoeckle does a nice job respecting the voice and self-understanding of the Russian church. Her essay conveys a sense that the Russian Orthodox Church is authentically struggling to define its relationship to the modern world, having emerged from decades of communist oppression. Her criticisms of the "acceptance-through-rejection" strategy are measured and thoughtful.

The second essay in the volume, by Father Capodistrias Hämmerli, offers extended reflection on the famous Lautsi case. The Lautsi case concerned the display of crucifixes in Italian public schools. Initially the European Court of Human Rights ruled that such displays violate the European Convention by disregarding the state's obligation to remain neutral toward religion. However, the decision caused enormous uproar, and perhaps in response to political pressure, the Grand Chamber overturned the lower court's decision, ruling that a crucifix on a wall was essentially a "passive symbol" imposing no significant harm on adherents of different faiths. Father Hämmerli sharply criticizes the first decision of the Court, arguing it reveals a fundamental fracture in Europe between East and West.

To be sure, the proper resolution of the Lautsi case is something about which even liberal democrats will disagree. Conservative Christian democrats have argued that the understanding of neutrality in the first decision was not in fact neutral, but aggressively secular in a way that seeks to force European societies to conform to a decidedly leftist vision of politics. Hämmerli echoes those criticisms; yet even so, his arguments have a strongly illiberal tinge to them. Hämmerli

rejects the principle of state confessional neutrality outright, arguing that national identity has a religious dimension. “Since the history and religious traditions of Europe are predominantly Christian,” he writes, “patriotism almost always includes a Christian dimension” (page 42). In response to this argument one immediately wants to ask, “Wasn’t that the problem with Europe’s Jews?” If membership in a nation depends on religious identity, religious minorities are inevitably excluded. Indeed, Hämmerli goes so far as to suggest that a commitment to national identity is incompatible with the principle of human equality, since equality leads to individual rights which overturn the “will of the people.” (page 43) Yet the so-called will of the people, whether expressed through a historic *Volk* or Rousseau’s General Will, is a construct. Actual citizens are never as homogenous as those who claim to speak for the nation would have them.

A vision much different from Hämmerli’s is set forth by Emmanuel Clapsis in a thoughtful essay titled “An Orthodox Encounter with Liberal Democracy.” Clapsis begins by noting that the “unprecedented pluralism” characteristic of democratic societies has “challenged the central role that the Orthodox Church played in moral formation in traditional societies.” (p. 111). Recognizing but rejecting the temptation for Orthodox churches to adopt an adversarial attitude to liberalism, Clapsis sets forth a constructive vision of how Orthodox churches ought to relate to democracy. Clapsis notes that in liberal societies individual freedom enjoys priority over social unity. The emphasis on the individual can lead to exploitative relationships that both undermine and contradict the communal dimension of human existence. For this reason some Orthodox reject liberalism altogether. Clapsis argues, however, that Orthodox churches should accept the liberal political order while simultaneously modeling a deeper vision of human freedom that culminates in social communion. “The task for the Church,” he writes, “is not to be the advocate of the eradication by secular force of those practices of freedom that lead to human

alienation and abuse, but to be an authentic communion of people who actively participate in the ongoing dialogue in the civil society that aims to strengthen human solidarity, justice, and peace” (115). Central to the Orthodox vision of freedom in communion is the celebration of the Eucharist, through which the Church becomes an icon of the Kingdom of God.

Clapsis’ vision for Orthodoxy might thus be described as comfortably modern while also counter-cultural. The church, in Clapsis’ view, accepts the conditions laid down by political liberalism while actively engaging liberal society in an effort to correct and improve it. Such a vision is more congenial to the author of this review than Hämmerli’s or that of the Russian Orthodox Church, although like all counter-cultural visions of Christianity it places a heavy burden on the laity. In my local congregation we generally have difficulty finding volunteers to help maintain the church buildings and grounds a few times a year. One wonders what it would take to transform this fairly typical congregation into a counter-cultural movement. Churches draw their members from the societies in which they exist. Inevitably those members share many, if not most, of the cultural dispositions of the dominant society. A keen awareness of this brute fact is no doubt one reason why illiberal Orthodox church leaders and theologians want the state to engage in the task of shaping culture. Without endorsing their view, we liberal Christians can still understand its attraction. Liberalism forces social groups to compete for adherents. Many Orthodox churches, fearing that competition, want protection from the state.

The clear impression left by the volume as a whole is that the Orthodox attitude toward democracy is not yet settled. While many voices within Orthodoxy value democracy and seek constructive engagement with it, there are at least as many Orthodox voices who are enemies of liberalism even with a small “l.” Viewed overall, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of*

Constantine provides a window into some of the disagreements about liberal democracy within the Orthodox tradition, which, in this reviewer's judgment, is its most significant contribution.