

ORTHODOXY'S EXTREMIST APPEAL

by Katie Kelaidis, PhD

Over the past year, I have been engaged an effort to understand how and why Orthodox Christianity has increasingly become a bastion for far-right extremists of various stripes. This is both a professional and personal interest. As a scholar, I am interested in how history is deployed in the service of contemporary political discourse, particularly on the far-right. As a practicing Orthodox Christian, I want to challenge us to think about the ways in which our witness to the world suggests that the Orthodox faith might very well be a safe haven for those who would visit hatred and violence against their fellow human beings. Because, challenging this notion is an essential part of our contemporary witness. My work specifically focuses on Orthodox Christian identity in the American far-right. This phenomenon has a poster child in Matthew Heimbach, the founder of the now defunct Traditionalist Workers Party and one of the organizers of the 2017 rally in Charlottesville VA “United the Right” which turned deadly when a counter protestor, Heather Heyer, was run over by a car. Heimbach, who joined the Orthodox Church through a mainstream Antiochian Archdiocese church in Indiana is often used as an example that the Church is “dealing” with this problem, as Heimbach was excommunicated following a public outcry after his conversion (He was photographed beating someone with an Orthodox cross on Bright Monday).

But my research suggests this is false comfort. The church has not dealt with this problem, and the growing forces of hatred and intolerance which have become an increasingly visible and viable part of the North American and European political landscape are enjoying a highly problematic relationship with the Orthodox Church. And I am not going to bury the dead. It seems clear why this has happened. These extremists have some bigotries, that when writ large, we find acceptable; and so, we are reluctant or frankly unwilling to challenge them even when their rhetoric and sometimes their actions cross the line into advocating extreme forms of discrimination and even violence. Misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Semitism are our gateway drug -- acceptable forms of prejudice in Orthodox thought and action -- excuses for ignoring the image of God in some human beings. Our tolerance of these forms of bigotry has devastating consequences.

In this article, I want to look at the two streams which I think are feeding the emergence of an explicitly Orthodox far right; and secondly, I want to look at the form this takes and what we might be able to do about it. As an advance warning, an actual solution is probably way above my pay grade.

Influence of Protestant Fundamentalism

It is important to note that for much of the history of the post-World War II Western far-right, Orthodox Christianity was seen as one of those Eastern threats to “Western Civilization.” Samuel Huntington as late as the early 1990s grouped Orthodox Civilization in with Islam as a threat to the West. The transformation of Orthodox Christianity in Western right-wing thought from Eastern threat to Christendom’s

standard-bearer has been driven in no small part by a wave of conversions by those from non-traditionally Orthodox backgrounds. Over the past three decades, there has been an increasing interest in Orthodox Christianity from those in fundamentalist and mainline Protestant circles disaffected by reformist or progressive impulses within their own traditions. While reliable statistics are difficult to come by, that this interest frequently results in conversions is something that can be felt in Orthodox parishes, media, and apologetics. This influence is particularly felt due to the extent to which formerly Protestant converts dominate self-identified Orthodox media, both in specifically Orthodox circles and within mainstream media. The Orthodox radio/podcast network *Ancient Faith Radio* is full of the voices of adult converts to the faith, and the aesthetic of the network mimics that of American Protestant Christian media as it has developed since the late 1960s. In secular American media, figures such as Rod Dreher, the editor of *The American Conservative*, regularly are called on to represent Orthodoxy. Dreher, who came to Orthodoxy from Catholicism decades after leaving the Methodist faith of his childhood and young adulthood, highlights many of the cultural and ideological problems raised by the wave of modern conversions. There is little doubt, by his own account, that Dreher's journey backward through the history of Christianity is as motivated as much (if not more) by the political tides of late 20th and early 21st century American political life as by a spiritual reckoning. Dreher does not convert to Orthodoxy when persuaded by its unique theological dicta. Rather, Dreher comes to Orthodoxy convicted first and foremost that Western Civilization is threatened from within and without, and that this crisis can only be resolved by a return to Western Civilization's Christian roots. And while this formulation invokes the specter of historical Christianity, the fact remains that this is a political, rather than a theological, proposition. The position taken by Dreher and other similarly situated Orthodox converts is namely that Eastern Christianity must become the standard-bearer of Christendom, because it is the only form of Christianity not yet "polluted" by the corrupting influences of Western modernity. It is notable, however, that this position is only tenable when Eastern Christianity is radically transformed into the image of an imagined lost Christian past that is in its final formation decidedly Western and shockingly ahistorical.

Take, for example, Western-rite Orthodox parishes, a phenomenon which began in the 1980s and 1990s, attributable largely to the conversion of whole Catholic and Episcopalian parishes to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Most of these parishes, once under the authority of an Eastern bishop's jurisdiction, did not adopt the Byzantine liturgy, but instead adopted the pre-Vatican II Catholic Mass (providing for the deletion of the *filioque* from the Nicene Creed and the addition of a stronger epiclesis in the consecration of the Eucharist). These modified rites are usually permitted to be said in either Latin or the vernacular. Even more strangely, perhaps, some such converted parishes practice a Eucharistic celebration based on old versions of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. This practice is defended at length on the official website of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, not surprising as this is the jurisdiction into which most of these rogue Western parishes converted (*On the Western Rite Liturgy*, <http://www.antiochian.org/node/22396>).

The theological correctness of these practices is neither within the scope of this paper nor the author's expertise; however, the sociological and historical implications of such a practice cannot be overlooked or understated. While contemporary religious fundamentalist movements imagine themselves as quintessentially reactionary, the fact remains that these movements are in practice largely, if not exclusively, radical. Rather than growing out of the historical practices and theology of the traditions from which they emerge, fundamentalist movements instead dialogue primarily with modernity and center around innovative ideology and practice largely drawn from an imagined past, created out of a desire to contradict those aspects of contemporary culture which adherents find distasteful. This is not to suggest that Western-rite Orthodox parishes are all "fundamentalist" in orientation; rather, this is to demonstrate that the liturgical practice adopted by Western-rite parishes reflects the wider issue of how converts from the Western Christian tradition have been received into Orthodoxy (particularly in America), the concessions that have been made for these converts, and the way in which these concessions can allow fundamentalist and/or Protestant impulses to be introduced into Orthodox Christian thought and practice.

Moscow Patriarchate: Radicalization and Nationalism

At the same time as primarily American Orthodoxy has experienced this infusion of fundamentalist thought, Russia, the world's largest majority Orthodox nation, has re-entered the global geopolitical fray in pretty big ways. Not a small part of this has been a kind of soft-power culture politic that has sought to prop up right wing forces in Western nations as a way of destabilizing those nations. And when placed in the context of Orthodox history and contemporary Russian Orthodox posturing, the threat of the union between American fundamentalist Orthodoxy and a revived, radicalized Russian Orthodox Church both within Orthodoxy and within the broader world becomes evident.

I don't think it is controversial to argue that Vladimir Putin has, for his part, put this revival to good use. In domestic policy, he has embraced the Church's hardline positions on a host of social issues from abortion to LGBT rights (positions shared by shockingly high numbers of ordinary Russians), frequently echoing the anti-Western sentiments of Orthodox clerics in his own stance. While similar to conservative Christian views anywhere, the particular Russian flavor of these positions are a reflection of a worldview born in Russia's centuries long struggle to protect Orthodoxy from Western corruption. Patriarch Kirill told Russia's state-sponsored English news network RT that "Western law now conflicts with man's moral nature" (See: discussion of Dreher 2017, above). This same interview could have shown a softer side of the Patriarch who, here at least, says that LGBT people should not be discriminated against or punished by the state. However, it is difficult to see a call for tolerance in a statement that is followed by an assertion that, "...this new trend poses a significant threat for the existence of the human race."

The Church's social positions are clearly flowing over into Russian life. The horrific legal and social position of Russia's LGBT community has been well-documented, including the 2013 "Propaganda Law," which effectively forbids any civil rights advocacy on behalf

of gender and sexual minorities. There is also Russia's highly controversial law essentially legislating domestic violence. The list goes on.

In this context, Russia has taken on a strange new image, particularly among ascendant far-right movements. These groups, both in the United States and Europe, many familiarized with Orthodoxy via the conversion of their political allies, have adopted a view of history shockingly similar to the one that has pervaded the Orthodox world for centuries, namely a view that Western progressivism and Islamic expansionism threaten true Christian civilization, and that these twin forces must be combated at every turn. It is this shared view of the world that is at the heart of the Trump-Putin affair and the reason that Patriarch Kirill calls Trump a "man who gives the world hope." It is also the reason that many members of the far-right outside of traditionally Orthodox countries have found a spiritual home in Orthodoxy, a migration that has met with mixed reactions among the clerics and faithful of the Church.

The unifying ideology, one advanced by men as powerful as Steve Bannon, has a name with a very Orthodox appeal: "traditionalism". This ideology, which attempts to distance itself from more recognizable white supremacy, blends nationalism with an anti-globalist agrarianism and reactionary religious conservatism. Its targets are "global elites" and "cultural Marxists"; and while most traditionalism has this flavor of economic populism, its rhetoric and most pointed activism are centered largely among issues of gender and sexuality as well as immigration, particularly from the Muslim world. It is "traditionalism," as innocuous as it sounds, that is the real threat. In this configuration, theological differences are often sublimated in the name of action against shared cultural and political enemies. It is a sort of perversion of interfaith dialogue, if you will.

To demonstrate how these two threads play into each other and also to show what this traditionalism looks like in practice, I want to highlight two non-Heimbach examples. The first is Heimbach's spiritual leader, Matthew Raphael Johnson. Johnson was also present in Virginia this last weekend. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska and is, for what it is worth, the intellectual powerhouse of Orthodox nationalism in America. For years, Johnson was a priest in a non-canonical Orthodox group called the [Old Calendarist Greek Orthodox Autonomous Orthodox Metropolia](#) before being defrocked for phyletism, essentially for being a racist. And yet, even from these far-off margins of the Orthodox world, Johnson has managed to have an impact on the mainstream. His books are Slavophilic revisions of Eastern European history and completely marginalized in academic circles. However, because his first book, *The Third Rome: Holy Russia, Tsarism and Orthodoxy*, enjoyed enough mainstream acceptance within Orthodoxy when it first came out, it was sold at the canonical [Orthodox Church in America \(OCA\)](#) parish I attended in college. Johnson's books and podcast, *The Orthodox Nationalist*, push the same brand of nationalism that adherents refer to as "traditionalism."

There was also a small upheaval about a [Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia](#) parish in Lenoir, Tennessee. Members in the anti-fascist Orthodox Facebook group believed that known white nationalists, neo-Confederates and neo-Nazis, were in the

parish. The group members had left negative Facebook and Google reviews, and now the priest's son was trying to contact them. I reached out to the priest's son as well. His reply read: "There was a massive misunderstanding about our parish on the internet spread by people who have never been to it. I reached out to these people to correct that issue, not to talk about any conspiracies within Orthodoxy in general. Our parish is not Neo-Nazi or Neo-Confederate." And despite some very questionable things posted by parishioners, I think he is basically right. The parish isn't "Neo-Nazi or Neo-Confederate." But there is much to suggest that the parish is perhaps a bit too tolerant of those who are.

And this for me is the problem. Much of what these extremists say does not sound extreme to our ears. In fact, often the nature of rhetoric in Orthodox circles, both in the diaspora and beyond, is a little too close, for comfort to the rhetoric of those extremists. And that makes us susceptible to becoming co-opted by them. What I advocate is better conversation, what we are trying to do here at this conference. For far too long, the Orthodox mentality has been one of siege, and our fears have frequently manifested as hatred. Clearly, there are historical reasons for this, but I cannot see any theological ones. "Be not afraid" the Lord tells us again and again. We have nothing to fear, least of all the world, least of all our fellow human beings. When we live in fear, we create a culture in which violence can grow, in which violence can be defended as the Orthodox response. If the relationship between Orthodoxy and the far right makes you uncomfortable, well, it should. Then I implore you to use your voice.

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