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Roeber, Anthony G.: *Mixed Marriages*. An Orthodox History. – Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2018. 290 S., pb. € 23,95 ISBN: 978-0-88141-631-2

Writing a history of mixed marriage in the Orthodox tradition would be an immense scholarly task. It would involve reading in many different ancient and modern languages and perusing local archives in many places impossible to access. Alternatively, it would involve the existence of a thorough, coherent body of scholarship for each of the local Orthodox traditions that could then be synthesized. One of the many merits of this stimulating book is that Anthony G. Roeber fully acknowledges these and other challenges the historian faces: “No liturgical rites for marriage survive for the first centuries of Christianity, nor their relationship to prevailing Persian, Roman, or late Judaic marriage customs” (29); “Details on actual marriage practices prior to the nineteenth century remain sparse” (166).

What, then, is a scholar seeking to provide a guide for those pondering the ever-growing numbers of mixed marriage to do? R. sets a clear and attainable goal: he seeks “to untangle the pastoral, liturgical, ecumenical, and canonical points of view” on mixed marriage, and “to encourage a public conversation [on the topic] within and beyond the Orthodox Church”. To do so, R. surveys Orthodox theological writing on mixed marriage, situating it where possible in a historical context. This is therefore ultimately a work of practical sacramental theology. As R. writes, “no discussion of mixed marriages can proceed before we explore the changing self-understanding, the memory, of what the Orthodox mean by ‘Marriage,’ ‘Church,’ ‘Mystery,’ and [...] the exercise of *oikonomia*” (24). This means not only that much of the book is taken up with these terms and their definitions. It also means that R.’s approach, rather than being the backward-looking history that the subtitle might suggest, instead seeks to look forward, and to explore what the Orthodox Church might do or should do regarding mixed marriage.

To suggest answers, R. first surveys Judaic, Syriac, and Roman marriage through the 13th century. He then moves on to mixed marriages from the 14th to the 20th centuries. He concludes with mixed marriages in the pluralistic world of the 21st century, drawing on Roman Catholic (especially German) theology where relevant. Mixed marriage can appear in surprising places: it proved to be a stumbling-block in the 2016 attempt to convene a Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete, for example (although it seems bold to suggest that the Georgians regarded marriage to Russians as mixed marriages). R. organizes this mass of material around one core theological principle and two core intellectual ideas: the connection of marriage to the Eucharist, and the notion of a “self-confident” frontier as opposed to a “guarded” border.

The connection between marriage and the broader life of an Eucharistic assembly is key (“the *Erfahrung* of marriage among the Orthodox argues for marriages to be assessed in terms of their

integration into—or degrees of separation from—a eucharistic ecclesiology”) (190). Given the trajectory of much 20th and 21st century Orthodox Eucharistic theology, one can indeed make such an argument. It is more problematic, however, to argue that the connection between marriage and the Eucharist has been historically *present* (86, 163, 229), rather than only something *desired* (75–81, 216–228). As R. shows, the marriage-Eucharist link has been asserted more consistently than it has been demonstrated, most forcefully by such scholars as John Meyendorff.

This brings us to R.’s central opposition: that of a border versus a frontier. A border is something “guarded,” “anxious,” and defensive, while a frontier is “self-confident,” “forward-looking, eschatological.” When Church leaders tended towards borders (such as Russian bishops in exile), there was little room to maneuver. When they have tended towards frontiers (the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1887, for example), there has been more flexibility. R.’s own sympathies are clearly for the latter: “loving condescension on behalf of non-Orthodox baptized spouses suggests a *frontier* status [...] if the Orthodox were to return to the practice of offering the Eucharist to Orthodox-Orthodox [sic] spouses [...] the iconic clarity of this marriage would be more sharply presented [...] that practice would also mark a canonical *frontier* rather than a *guarded border* by a self-confident eucharistic community” (206–207). This border-frontier opposition may be a useful way to approach where and how to set mixed marriage boundaries.

R.’s questions are often as interesting as his answers. What separates a first marriage from a second or third? Can first marriages of Eastern Orthodox to Oriental Orthodox or Roman Catholics include sharing the Eucharist as part of the rite? He displays a welcome historical sensitivity: it is very useful, for example, to be reminded that the practices of the wealthy and powerful differed from those of the lower classes, and that the experience of married women, “who in many contexts possess both theological education and the ability to articulate [pastoral] perspectives, will have to be included in shaping the future narrative of how marriage is experienced in the Church” (222).

There are a few incongruities. Although R. leads with a mention of same-sex marriage in the opening line and closes with it on the last page of the book, he does so only to say that it should not “distract” Orthodox Christians from mixed marriage, so that discussion is left as a bit of a teaser. The intent of the cover illustration is similarly unclear: Vasilii Pukirev’s *The Unequal Marriage*, with old men led by a balding bridegroom leering at a stricken, passive young bride, depicts not a confessionally mixed marriage, but one contracted for financial reasons and auguring little happiness. If the goal is to show that entering an Orthodox marriage for the wrong reasons is not a good idea, or to condemn women’s lack of choice and rights, it succeeds. As a comment on mixed marriage, however, it is somewhat misleading. Finally, R. acknowledges that using “emotional memory” as a source is problematic—but does so anyhow.

These minor cavils aside, R. has accomplished an impressive feat. In a short space, he has surveyed a great deal of Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology and practice on mixed marriages, and brought his own humane and thoughtful pastoral insights to the topic. Those grappling with mixed marriage both as scholars and as practitioners will find this a stimulating and useful book.

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