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Review Essay: Orienting the East

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Orienting the East: Notes on Anthropology and Orthodox Christianities

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If this blog testifies to the efflorescence of the anthropology of Christianity, anthropological and ethnographic work on Eastern and, especially, Oriental Orthodoxies remains somewhat sparse and scattered at the time of writing. To some extent this is a matter of academic time lag: anthropologists have recognised a lacuna and a good amount of research is now underway and beginning to show fruit. Since a majority of anthropologists working on Orthodox Christianities are now at PhD or early career level, we can expect a substantial growth in the literature in the coming years. Rather than lament the lack of anthropological attention to Orthodoxy, people are getting on with the work of producing it.

With this in mind, I would like to use this post to begin asking: what can Orthodox Christianities do for the anthropology of Christianity, and what can an anthropology of Christianity do for the study of Orthodox Christianities? In the spirit of starting a conversation rather than a systematic review, I will suggest some areas of particular interest emerging from existing work, and outline some conceptual challenges that an anthropology of Orthodoxy raises for a broader anthropology of Christianity.

Divisions and Definitions

We do not want to draw too clear a line between Orthodox and other Christianities. Bandak, in Syria (2012b), and Hann, in Eastern Europe (e.g. 2002, see also Naumescu 2007: 29-31), for example, describe groups of Christians who do not slot into easy Orthodox-Catholic distinctions. These people have much to say to the study of both 'Orthodoxy' and 'Catholicism'. Conversely, there is a need to keep in mind the distinction, often elided, between what have become known as the 'Eastern' (including Greece, Russia, Romania, and so forth) and the 'Oriental,' or non-Chalcedonian, Orthodox churches (Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, Ethiopian, etc.). It is a strange irony that scholars who have lamented the lack of Orthodoxy in the anthropology of Christianity, and who identify a Western bias in the study of Christianity more broadly, are also those who most conspicuously neglect the non-Chalcedonian Christianities.

Distinctions between Orthodox and Catholic, Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, follow historical fissures and hierarchies, and describe lines of doctrinal and political affinity and difference that are still widely recognised. At the same time, many recognise broader commonalities – at least with those whose communion they share, and often well beyond. The historical schisms and reunions of different churches work against any tidy classification of Christianities.

These semantic/definitional questions are important, but they are not a huge problem. They raise, in fact, common and valuable questions of the unity and multiplicity of Christianity/Christianities that are as vibrant, productive, and unresolved for Christians as for anthropologists of Christianity (e.g., Cannell 2006, Coleman 2010, Bialecki 2012). Actually, the problem of unity gives me a chance to highlight one particularly Orthodox approach to a question of general interest, which is to regard the territorial patchwork of regional churches as a necessary and pragmatic response to the needs of cultural difference and worldly governance, while the theoretical universality of the Eucharist enables a potentially simultaneous and total spiritual unity among Christians (Binns 2002). Divisions in the Communion, of course render this concept ever-problematic, as an (Oriental) Ethiopian friend remarked to me over her perceived inability to take the Sacrament in an (Eastern) Greek service.

The Politics of Matter and Spirit

A number of excellent anthropological works about Orthodox Christians have been produced in the past forty years (to name a few, Campbell 1964, Hirschon 1989, Stewart 1991, Kan 1999, du Boulay 2009, Rogers 2009). But few of these have been situated within an explicit anthropological project aimed at the comparative study of Orthodoxy, let alone of Orthodoxy vis-a-vis Christianity as a whole. There are some good reasons for this, which I discuss below, but nonetheless a more systematic coordination is overdue. And it is underway, with Hann and Goltz's edited volume (2010) marking a major step towards focused conversation (this despite Hann's (2007) stated objections to the wider project of an anthropology of Christianity).

In that volume, Gabriel Hanganu's piece raises a number of parallels between Orthodox and neo-Orthodox thinking on materiality, and anthropological deconstructions of subject-object divides and ideas of human-exclusive agency as developed by Strathern, Gell, and Latour among others. Hanganu's suggestion deserves much greater attention, especially given the anthropology of Christianity's paradigmatic focus on the relationship between materiality and meaning (e.g. Engelke 2007, Keane 2007). Consider the following, from Michael Herzfeld:

In the resurgent Neo-Orthodox model... mental and physical being are unified in a single ontology. People belong, not to a consumerist or to a rigidly disciplined society, but to a universal fellowship in which the material and the symbolic are mutually indistinguishable, and in which the submission of the body becomes the fulfilment of the soul (Herzfeld 2002: 211).

Here too there is common ground between neo-Orthodox thinking and post-humanist or anti-naturalist trends in anthropology (meaning theory that challenges human exclusivism and the universality of an objectified 'nature'). These are surely productive points of departure.

A major focus of an anthropology of Orthodox Christianity will be to cast light on the articulations between contemporary popular material practice and the theological traditions of substance and spirit that Orthodox traditions have produced in the past thousand years and beyond. This will require attention to the work involved in making matter holy: how the production of priestly vestments, the sanctifying of water, the work of abstinence and the consecration of food cohere to allow the truly other-worldly to manifest and become tangible, however temporarily, in the world (Carroll 2012, Boylston 2013).

As a nexus point of heaven and earth and a focus for the material sacred, the liturgy is central in Orthodox Christianities, to an extent that is opening up new perspectives on the relationship between Christianity and ritual per se. The political importance of the liturgy, of contestations over the techniques and places in which humans enter communion with God, and the insistence upon the reality of transubstantiation, emerge with particular clarity in Orthodox traditions (Bandak 2012b, Naumescu 2013, Boylston 2013). In contestations of the Orthodox liturgies we can find privileged insight into the nexus of matter and spirit, and of the ritual and the political.

Part of the point of the material turn in religious studies was to foreground the political aspects of relations with radical otherness (Vries 2001, Engelke 2007, Meyer 2008a, b, 2011). Nowhere is the nexus of politics, substance, and the ineffable more striking than in the discourse of the miraculous evident in contemporary Arabic Christianities. The works of Bandak (2012a, b), Shenoda (2009, 2010, 2012), and Heo (2012, 2013) describe from various angles how miracles have become central to Christians' negotiating their faith, political minority status, and historical rootedness in Egypt and Syria. Statues and images, and other substances too, in these contexts contain perennial miraculous potential. They can testify to the presence and care of a higher guardian of the community, and to a higher purpose for present struggles. Similarly, Orthodox discourses of sainthood incorporate questions of how holiness manifests among humans, and of the proper registers of political and spiritual authority (Bandak & Bille 2013, Kormina 2013). In short, many of the contemporary interests of the Anthropology of Christianity, and the study of religion, are things that Orthodox Christianities have been developing for quite some time. The Easternness of Orthodox Christianities, and their historic relations with nation states, have meant that they have developed in continuous political relationships with Islam as well as with other Christian groups, resulting in distinct ways of finding the political in everyday religious experience and religious experience in the political. It is in Orthodox Christianities more than any others that the fuzzy frontiers between Islam and Christianity have been worked out over the course of centuries.

Anti-Literalism and the Ethnography of Theology

A common theme that Orthodoxies present to a comparative anthropological study of Christianity is a comfort with, even celebration of, paradox and mystery as viable and virtuous semiotic attitudes (Naumescu 2013). This is a central proposal of Hann and Goltz (2010), who suggest that *mysterion* and *paradoxon* demand a profound destabilisation of prevailing social scientific epistemology. Ethiopian and Syriac hermeneutic traditions, for example, resist entirely the notion, or the possibility of authoritative interpretation of scripture, instead using poetic and symbolic registers and superimposing diverse and apparently contradictory readings in the same discourses (Lee 2011). From one famous perspective, the central aim of Ethiopian Orthodox practice is the

production of double meaning (Levine 1964, Chaillot 2009). Lee highlights the linguistic ideology of St Ephrem the Syrian (c.306-373 C.E.) in which a sacred text that could be encapsulated in totality from one perspective and in one excursus would be a poor text indeed. Ephrem writes:

Who is capable of comprehending the immensity of possibilities of one of your utterances? What we leave behind us... is far greater than what we take from it, like those who are thirsting [when they imbibe] from a fountain. Many are the perspectives of his word, just as many are the perspectives of those who study it (McCarthy 1993 I.18-19).

Language, that is, cannot encapsulate the really real. In this sense there are intriguing affinities between Orthodox and poststructuralist thought (Makrides 2012: 271), although we must not forget the massive ontological difference between deconstruction and monotheism. Certainly, for anthropologists with an interest in non-totalising or non-literalist models of language and writing, Orthodox traditions contain vast mines of material. As an anthropologist, trying to read John of Damascus (646-679 C.E.) or John Chrysostom (c.347-407 C.E.) is stimulating because I can no longer tell whether I am engaging with an informant or a fellow theorist; in fact, it's a reminder that all ethnographic conversations are of this kind, or should be. It's just easier to see it when your 'informant' is asking what symbols do, and other similarly anthropological questions.

Reading theological works ethnographically can be an important exercise in symmetrical anthropology, but we need much more 'traditional' ethnography, too: a key point of development will be to ask how scholarly hermeneutics articulate with the interpretive and epistemological ideas and assumptions of Orthodox Christians in daily life and with different degrees of engagement with their religious traditions. My own fieldwork in Ethiopia suggests that striking continuities exist between the philosophical/theological and the everyday, even with relatively low levels of direct communication between the two. The potential comparative value of the contrast between these attitudes and notions of truth, authority, and evidence current in some mainstream and other Protestant traditions (e.g. Crapanzano 2000, Keane 2007, Bielo 2009) is extensive. In many streams of Protestantism, people seem to be reaching similar conclusions (Bielo 2011: 55-61). This is one of the main contributions an anthropology of Christianity can offer to the study of Orthodox Christianities (e.g., Hanganu 2010, Luehrmann 2010).

Religion in Culture, Religion as Culture

One question often posed of the anthropology of Christianity pertains to the rationale of bracketing Christianity from other domains of life (Hann 2007). Two separate scholars who worked with Oriental Orthodox Christians have expressed to me the feeling that their interlocutors' interests spilled far over from exclusively Christian domains, especially into political realms, that made them wonder whether 'anthropology of Christianity' was really a sufficient or appropriate label for the scope of their work.

An answer to this is to say that the anthropology of Christianity, as a Public, consists of any person who chooses to address themselves to the anthropology of Christianity. As such we should expect it to constantly overlap with other domains, and 'anthropologists of Christianity' to be many other things simultaneously (Coleman 2012). But another approach is to ask why anthropologists of Orthodoxy in particular might have problems with the concept of an

anthropology of Christianity. I think we can make the problem work for us, that is, by identifying something common to Christianities across the Orthodox spectrum: while recognising the category of 'religion' as autonomous (cf. Asad 1993), Orthodox Christianities, especially in rural areas, tend to imbricate their Christianity tightly and inextricably into every corner of life, into politics and production and food and everything else. In a neat example of consistency between theology and popular practice, this pervasion parallels the miaphysite Christology of the Oriental churches, which declares that the divine and the human in Christ constitute a single mixture, inseparable. Du Boulay's *Life and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Community* (2009) is a particularly cohesive account of the interpenetration of religion and the mundane, and my own thesis describes a similar situation in semi-rural Ethiopia (Boylston 2012). The crucial subtlety, though, is that it does not follow that Orthodox Christianities are this-worldly – or at least not entirely. In Ethiopia, as in Greece, peasants and scholars maintain vivid distinctions between the spiritual and the worldly, and in Russia pitched debate continues between 'worldly' and 'un-worldly' parties (Agadjanian 2003). Everything pertains to religion but everything is not religious; small wonder that anthropologists have trouble with compartmentalising their work.

A further consequence of the simultaneous inherence and elevation of Christianity in the world is an ongoing debate as to whether Orthodox Christianities constitute unified cosmologies, or divide, as they often seem to, into popular and clerical traditions. Stewart and du Boulay have debated the issue widely as regards Greece, where *neriides* and saints coexist happily (Stewart 1991, du Boulay 1974, 2009), but it applies equally elsewhere. Certainly Orthodox Christians of any stripe who deal with spirits or memorise incantations against the evil eye would reject any implication that their Christianity was thereby in question (as with several points in this essay, the same could be said of many Catholics, e.g. Cannell 1999, and I do not intend my argument to exclude them). Compare this to the portable, globalising 'part-culture' of Pentecostalism (Coleman 2010), in which religious forms are constructed as transportable and opposable to local ideas. One of the anthropology of Christianity's current strengths is its analysis of the ways in which especially Protestant Christianity becomes transportable and capable of cultural relocation (e.g. Keane 2007, Robbins 2007, Coleman 2010, Meyer 2011): we have entextualisation, and part-cultures, sensational forms, and radical change.

The Religion-Modernity-Globalisation Complex, and the Protestants

An anthropology of Orthodox Christianity can contribute a quite different view of Christianity and globalisation, one in which Christianity is not an agent or a vector of something called 'modernity', but often seen by its members as their only recourse against it. Simion Pop (2011) draws on an Asadian notion of tradition to describe how an 'Orthodox complex space' operates as a locus of continuity and creativity both. The 'complex space' refers to the Orthodox infusion of life far beyond its institutional presence, sometimes opposed to 'modernity' for many, but also a polymorphous resource for developing new visions of what modernities might be (Makrides 2012). Pop is looking, with some success, for a way of describing a social phenomenon which revolves around, but also goes far beyond, an institutional centre, in which heterodox elements engage in continuous push and pull with the authorised guardians of tradition. Whereas many kinds of Protestantism have spread by techniques of rupture, Orthodoxy works rather by infusion. In an era of deterritorialisation Orthodox Christianities remain resolutely territorial (or have perhaps become so – Roudometof 2013), but in a manner more subtle and complex than is often recognised. One

necessity is to bring architecture back into debates on religion and territory. Where Pentecostals and many Evangelicals, famously, hold services more or less anywhere with a roof (or without, Engelke 2007), across the Orthodox world the construction of Churches, as opposed to the construction of mosques, or to secular civic use of space, is perhaps the most prominent sphere in which religious-political disputes become visible (Pop 2011, Abbink 2010, Marcus 2002).

The interface between Orthodoxies, globalisation, and whatever constitutes modernity (discourses, moral narratives, technologies, financial circuits, global flows) is fertile ground in particular for further reassessment of what I would call the Protestantism-Reform-Modernity complex. This involves somehow reconciling the fact that European Protestant Reformation appears to have had something to do with the emergence of capitalism and modernist ideology (which is not the same as a reified 'modernity'), with the equally compelling fact that Ignatius Loyola, Hernan Cortes, Sun Yatsen, Nasser, the Empress Cixi, Hirohito, Shogun Tokugawa, Atatürk, Plato, Augustine, and Toussaint Louverture had just as much to do with the way the world looks today, not to mention the great secular Jewish thinkers of 19th and 20th century Euro-America, whom everyone seems to forget, even as they are citing them.

Hann has repeatedly complained of a Protestant bias in the anthropology of Christianity and modernity (2007, 2012), but this fails to account for the vast and growing influence of charismatic and evangelical religious practices across the globe. From a religious perspective, the Protestant hegemony over discourses of modernity (i.e. people's ideas of what modernity is) stretches far beyond the academic sphere. Across the world in places where Protestantism and other Christianities (not to mention other religions, see Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1990: 202-240) sit together, coincide, and clash, almost all of the accoutrements of popular modernity are associated with the Protestants: using media; textuality and discourses of rationality (this in spite of the long Jesuit tradition of scholarship); western-style education; capitalist commerce. The entwined histories of Christianity and colonialism have ensured that this is so.[\[1\]](#)

This raises a serious question for non-Protestant Christians: if you are trying to mark yourself as not-Protestant, and to constitute alternative discourses, how then can you engage with media or education or capitalism, short of all-out rejection? This issue has urgency in Addis Ababa right now, as the worst thing an Orthodox Christian can be called is a Reformist (*Tehadiso*), while the Orthodox are simultaneously attempting to renovate their religious organisation to meet the demands of contemporary urban life.

Granted, the academic tradition of tracing the associations between Protestantism and capitalism may bear some responsibility for the current difficulty in thinking modernity from a non-Protestant religious perspective. But the answer is not to create a new counter-discourse with Protestantism and Reformation removed from the picture. In other words, *pace* Hann, it is not distorting to discuss Orthodoxy in a comparative framework with Protestantism. Orthodox Churches have had to deal continuously with the realities of Reformation for centuries. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have been debating with Protestants since at least 1830 (Crummey 1972, Getatchew 1998). The reverberations of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations were truly global, and even rural Christians in Orthodox heartlands today live in continuous consciousness of the Protestant question in some of its forms (usually phrased as, "What are we going to do about these Protestants?").

The global influence of Protestantisms, then, is an empirical phenomenon more than an academic bias, and it demands attention. Or at least, of Protestant-like forms and ideas: some sense of Reform as developed by Taylor (2007) has relevance across religious contexts, in any place where differentiation between religious specialists and lay people has developed and then come into question. Indeed, we may be better served tracing discourses and practices of Reform as a potentiality in all revealed religions than arguing about what is Protestant and what is not.

An Anthropology of Eastern/Orthodox Christianities

An anthropology of Orthodox Christianities, as it develops, must chronicle not just Orthodox responses to other hegemonies, but Orthodox formulations of ways of being of their own. The complexities of relations between centralised, hierarchical institutions, and popular creativity in Orthodox Christianities is a vital and productive source of ethical practices and ideas, and of ways of negotiating the nexus between the authority of the past and of institutions, and the pull of commodity forms, global transformation and the ideals and ideology of development.

In the spirit of Orthodox hermeneutics, this post has not aimed for a definitive account of what an anthropology of Orthodoxy might become. I have attempted to pick up some threads that other anthropologists have begun to lay down, and to argue that an anthropology of Orthodoxy should be, again in Orthodox style, both autonomous and integrated into something larger (or, indeed, in several larger wholes). I apologise to any whose work I have unjustly missed, and I would ask patience in letting this short piece stand as a token towards more extensive review work that is clearly due.

I have tried to avoid the terms 'immanence' and 'transcendence' in this piece, not because I question their use, but in wariness of pre-determining one of the major subjects of inquiry: how do people work and live with things of this world and the things that are, in one way or another, not? What do politics and territory have to do with truth, light, and beauty? Orthodox Christianities are not alone in dealing with these questions – just the opposite – but their approaches and solutions are interesting, important, and understudied. Which is good reason to get to work.

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[1] This is much less the case in, for example, China or Japan, where quite different conditions apply (but not completely; see Cao 2010 and [Hu, this blog](#)).

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