

“DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX EUROPE: COMPARING GREECE, SERBIA AND RUSSIA”

Routledge, 2020, London & New York, pp. 176, ISBN: 9780367420833, £120

The revision of Huntington’s thesis on the incompatibility of Eastern Orthodoxy with Western political values is undertaken by Marko Veković to support the argument on the varying roles of Orthodox Churches in the democratization process in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the innovative comparative analysis on the relationship between Orthodoxy and politics of transition, the plethora of historical events is narrated and interpreted by the author clearly and logically to provide the readers the possibility of finding the answers to the questions: why Orthodoxy differs in its perception of democracy, participation in democratization processes, and what kind of endogenous and exogenous conditions may produce these differences.

In addressing these inquires, Veković follows various methodological approaches which assist the understanding of the political roles of Orthodox Churches in the recent and still ongoing process of societal transformation from authoritarianism to liberal democracies. Specifically, he applies the perspective of Toft, Philpott, and Shah on the role of religious actors in global politics to the analysis of the cases of democratization in Greece, Serbia, and Russia designating the free-riding, leading, and resisting roles of Orthodox Churches in the processes of political and religious transit.

In contrast to the studies on Orthodoxy and politics, political theology, or Social Thought, which highlight the possible compatibilities and/or constraints of engagement of Orthodox Christianity with modernity and assume the presence of a homogeneous system of political-theological perspectives within Orthodox tradition, this study follows another approach. It addresses the importance of endogenous theoretical debates on Orthodoxy and modernization; however, emphasizing stronger necessity of investigating the Church action and types of leadership in the public life and discourse during the turmoil of transit. The origins and consequences of democratization transit of societies dominated by Orthodox Christianity together with the specific role of religious leaders and institutions performed in the changing historical dynamics are at the center of this book.

The emphasis on comparative research allows considering the democratization process in a diversity of socio-religious and political contexts. Moreover, it became possible to link the processes of internal democratization of the Churches with the processes of liberalization of political and religious lives of broader

societies. To present the snapshots of democratization stages in three selected countries, the author examined the types of Church-State relations while interpreting the broader socio-political context of transformations and the type of political regime that preceded democratic transitions. One more important factor which is taken into consideration is how the democratization started, namely what kind of political actors were engaged in the process of awakening democratic values and attitudes in three selected dominant Orthodox Christian societies.

The cogency of the arguments of the author is based on a detailed reconstruction of historical events and political discourses related to the various stages of democratization in Greece, Serbia, and Russia. Following the institutional political analysis, the levels of autonomy of Orthodox Churches are investigated to explain their more free or more dependent statuses in relation to the states. Among various hypotheses on the role of Orthodoxy in democratization, Veković proposed that “the more the Church is institutionally autonomous and thus independent from the State, its democratizing potential increases. Contrary to this, the Church will not support democratization, nor oppose the authoritarian regime, if its level of autonomy is low” (p. 29). Namely, the differences in the prevailing models of State-Church relations in Orthodox countries – *symphonia* – and the type of political regime are at the center of this research. The author manages to clearly show that despite the similarities of the starting points of political transformation linked to the communist heritage of the governance and the dominance of Orthodoxy in cultural lives, the trajectories of democratization were influenced by the diverse types of authoritarianism, levels of autonomy of the Church, and types of *symphonia* in each out of three cases.

In explaining various cases, the author argues that in Greece, the Church performed a free-riding role and did not oppose the military junta’s regime during 1967–1974; however, it did not oppose democratic changes as well. Three narrated cases grab the reader’s attention toward the changing public positions of Orthodoxy during the democratization stages and the importance of the Church leadership, as it was showed on the example of the Serbian Church and the leading role of Patriarch Pavle during the period of 1991–2000 in opposing the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. The case of the Russian Orthodox Church illustrates the resisting role of the religious institution toward the democratization process during the transformation dynamics in post-communist Russia. The brief period of *perestroika* was followed by a political backlash of the state, and the failures of democratization of the state were not considered by the Orthodox Church with a critical response due to the “*asymmetric symphonia*” meaning that “one side (the State) is stronger than the other (the Church)” (p. 126).

The volume is an important contribution to the study of Orthodoxies and democracies within a broader comparative approach to the study of religion and politics. It draws our attention to the dynamic character of the democratization

process and highlights the importance of studying not only State–Church relations or institutional perspectives of Orthodoxy but the necessity of mapping the role of religiously oriented political parties, social movements, and politically active religious organizations during the societal transformations. The author succeeded in presenting the variety of Orthodox responses toward the democratic political changes showing that Orthodox values and positions could be compatible with the values of democracy at various degrees. However, it is sometimes not clear if the author in his attempt to justify the argument of compatibility considers the failures of democratization in terms of "wrong Orthodoxy." As stated in the concluding part of the book, a comparative perspective may assist in avoiding "oversimplifying the problem, biased approaches and ideologically based assumptions" (p. 159).

Veković's engagement with the topic, the richness of historical material presented, and clear methodology of analysis by which the author highlighted the ambiguous roles that Orthodox Churches performed at the political moment of transit from authoritarianism to democracy, make this book important both for scholars as well as general readership. It is primarily relevant for those who are looking for political and sociological analysis on Orthodoxy and democratization, political values of Orthodox tradition, and Church-State relations in post-communist countries. Moreover, thanks to the variety of contextual factors and nuances of transition, this book will be interesting for all who are engaged with the study of democratic systems showing the possible risks and backlashes of modern democracies and roles that religious traditions may perform within political life.

Giuseppe Giordan¹

Date received: February 8, 2021

Date accepted: February 15, 2021

1 Giuseppe Giordan is Professor of Sociology at the University of Padova (Italy), where he teaches Sociology of Religion and Religion and Human Rights. He serves as a Director of the International Joint PhD programme in Human Rights, Society, and Multilevel Governance. He is co-editor of the Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion, and author, co-author and co-editor of more than 20 book and special issues, and nearly 70 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. He is a member of the Council of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion. Contact E-mail: giuseppe.giordan@unipd.it