



Democratization

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Democratization in Christian Orthodox Europe: comparing Greece, Serbia and Russia

by Marko Veković, London & New York, Routledge, 2020, 176 pp., appendices, notes, bibliography, index, £96 (hardcover), ISBN 9780367420833

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BOOK REVIEW

Democratization in Christian Orthodox Europe: comparing Greece, Serbia and Russia, by Marko Veković, London & New York, Routledge, 2020, 176 pp., appendices, notes, bibliography, index, £96 (hardcover), ISBN 9780367420833

The role of religious actors in democratization processes around the globe has caught the attention of numerous scholars in the last decades. However, the scholarly literature in this field of study has been dominated by a paradigm that Orthodox Christianity, unlike Western Christianity, represents an obstacle for democratization. Consequently, the literature suggests that Orthodox Christian Churches are unlikely to actively engage in democratization processes in their respective countries. The main goal of this book is to challenge this paradigm, and questions the notion of Orthodoxy as an inherently anti-modern and anti-democratic religious tradition.

In its essence, this book is a small-n comparative study of political behaviour of three relevant and comparable cases of the roles of the Orthodox Christian Churches in the democratization processes in Greece, Serbia and Russia. Veković wonders why these Churches acted differently in the democratization processes in their respective countries, albeit sharing the same political theology. In order to answer this question, Veković analyses the democratization processes in the three Orthodox-majority countries under the framework of the *Orthodox Christian Cluster of Democratization*. Even though Veković does not argue that the outcomes of democratization in these countries were solely dependent on the role of religious actors, he argues that their role should not be ignored or neglected. Moreover, by focusing mostly on original sources, he concludes that the political behaviour of the Church of Greece should be labelled as the “Free-rider”, the Serbian Orthodox Church as the “Leading actor”, while the case of the Russian Orthodox Church should be identified as “Reactionary resister”. Consequently, the following question arises: Why?

In my opinion, Veković’s answer to this question is probably the most valuable part of the book. He boldly claims that Orthodox Christian political theology is not the answer. Instead, he suggests that institutional Church-State arrangements, the wider political and historical context in which democratization occurred, the type of the authoritarian regime which preceded democratization, and finally the question of who initiated democratization are more important than political theology. Thus, this book makes a solid argument that the political behaviour of the Orthodox Christian Church in the democratization processes is not the consequence of the political theology, but rather a consequence of a set of mostly institutional and historical factors.

In all three countries, the Orthodox Church showed democratic capacity, or political ambivalence, but in a different manner. In Greece, the Church did nothing to oppose the dictatorship of the military junta and was actually considered as one of the main pillars of the regime from 1967 to 1974. However, when the junta was overthrown in 1974, the Church openly welcomed democracy. For that reason, Veković is

right to say that the Church of Greece represents the “free-rider” model in the democratization processes.

In the Serbian case, the book documents official statements of the Serbian Orthodox Church against the Milošević regime from 1991 to 2000 to grasp the Church-State relationship, showing its open opposition against the regime. It is unfortunate though that the author did not deal in detail with some peculiarities during this period, such as the Serbian Patriarch’s involvement in the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. Although officially disinterested in the Church and legacies of the state promoting secularism inherited from the communist period, Slobodan Milošević needed the Serbian Patriarch and his signature to represent the Serbian politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Dayton 1995. At first, the Patriarch gave his signature, but the Holy Council of the Serbian Orthodox Church withdrew it just a few months later.

Dealing with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) after the fall of communism, the author shows the ROC’s democratic capacity, especially visible from 1990 to 1997, and its more authoritarian tendencies from 2000 and particularly after 2012. However, Veković is right to say that the stronger integration between Church and State in Russia started with the 1997 Law on Religious Freedom, which led to the change in its political behaviour and towards more authoritarian position. This is particularly important in post-2000 Russia, since the ROC is considered to be an important pillar of Putin’s regime. However, throughout Russian history there are numerous examples how the State used ROC in order to achieve its political goals. That is why it is unfortunate that the author did not mention, for example, how Joseph Stalin used ROC in 1943 for political purposes, as he could draw significant similarities of Church-State relations in contemporary Russia.

Despite the fact that the author excluded some important historical events in the Church-State relations, particularly for the Serbian and Russian cases, this book presents convincing empirical and theoretical support for the thesis that Orthodoxy is not an univocally anti-democratic religious tradition. Thus, this book offers a valuable source for the much needed paradigm-shift in the literature on Orthodoxy and democracy. Due to its innovative and fresh theoretical approach this book will surely become a must-read source in the study of Orthodoxy and politics in the future.

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