

# Orthodoxy and Global Pluralism

PETER L. BERGER

**Abstract:** As scholars become more aware of the importance of religion in world affairs, several have begun to ask whether specific religious traditions are compatible with the institutions and values of liberal democracy. With approximately 350 million Orthodox Christians in the world, and given the great political and economic importance of the many countries they call home, an understanding of Orthodox Christianity is of importance for a general understanding of the contemporary world. Modernity undermines the homogeneity that characterizes traditional societies, and it brings about racial, ethnic, and religious pluralism. To survive effectively in this situation, a religious institution must develop the capacity to function as a voluntary association. Nothing in its history has prepared Orthodoxy for such an eventuality, and in all likelihood Russia is the only country where a traditional relationship of *sinfonia* has a chance of continuing.

**Key words:** Christianity, pluralism, orthodoxy, religion

September 11, 2001, and subsequent events have brought unprecedented attention to religion in the media, academia, and popular imagination of Western countries. Understandably, much of the attention has been on Islam, and the perspective has been largely pejorative. But there also has been the recognition that there are religious traditions whose adherents do not practice terrorism, and that there are situations in which religion plays a positive role. There has been particular interest in the question of whether specific religious traditions are compatible with the institutions and values of liberal democracy.

It is estimated that there are approximately three hundred and fifty million Orthodox Christians in the world. (The term “Orthodox” is somewhat flexible, sometimes only referring to churches affiliated with the Patriarch of Constantinople, sometimes also to the so-called non-Chalcedonian churches, such as the Armenian and the Coptic.) Most of the countries with majority Orthodox popu-

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lations are of great political and economic importance. A better understanding of Orthodoxy, therefore, is not something that should just interest theologians and scholars of religion, but is of importance for an understanding of the contemporary world.

My article is from the social science viewpoint. Not being Orthodox myself, I cannot make normative judgments or give prescriptions from an Orthodox standpoint. (I am theologically liberal Lutheran and, although I have very strong sympathies for Orthodoxy, I have no inclination to “go swimming in the Bosphorus”—to use the graphic phrase that has been used to describe converts to Orthodoxy.) However, at the end of this article, I make some observations on why the future of Orthodoxy should be of religious concern to others who are not part of this tradition.

Before directly addressing the topic of Orthodoxy, I think it will be useful to make some general observations about the place of religion in today’s world. Despite massive evidence to the contrary, there persists among many people (not least the Christian theologians) the view that we live in an age of secularity. Scholars of religion have called this view “secularization theory.” (I myself shared this view in my early career as a sociologist of religion, then changed my mind, not because of some philosophical or theological reconsideration, but because of the weight of empirical data.) Simply put, modernity inevitably brings about a decline of religion or, another way, modernization causes secularization. This is not an occasion to review the controversy over this matter, which has gone on for several decades. Today, most scholars of religion agree that the secularization theory has been effectively disproven. Far from being characterized by secularity, our age has witnessed vast eruptions of religious passion. The modern age is as religious as any previous period of history; in some places it is more religious than ever. There are two very interesting exceptions to this generalization. One is geographical: Western and Central Europe is indeed marked by a significant decline of religion, having engendered a phenomenon that I call “Eurosecularity,” since it has become an important ingredient of European cultural identity. The other exception is sociological: A relatively thin but influential international intelligentsia, for whom secularity has become not only an act but, at least for some of its members, a matter of ideological commitment. Both of these exceptions are relevant for Orthodoxy—not everywhere, but in some countries.

What modernity does bring about, more or less inevitably, is pluralism. In a broad sense, this can be defined as the coexistence under conditions of civic peace of different racial, ethnic, or religious groups in the same society. Religious pluralism, which concerns us here, is a subset of a more general phenomenon. There is no great mystery as to why modernity has this effect. Through most of history, most people lived in homogenous communities that interacted very little with outsiders and, if they did, did so in an antagonistic way. Modernity undermines such homogeneity. It brings about a situation in which insiders and outsiders constantly rub up against each other—either physically (though urbanization and travel) or virtually (through mass literacy and all the modern media of mass communication). Pluralism becomes a pervasive fact of social life, but it also penetrates the consciousness of individu-

als. This process of steadily spreading pluralism has been going on for a long time in the lives of human beings in modern and modernizing societies. Globalization has simply meant an acceleration and intensification of this process, and it has spread to just about every corner of the planet. Even the most enthusiastic anthropologists or travel agents promoting ecotourism have a very hard time finding places that have remained pristinely untouched by pluralism.

Religious pluralism, not so long ago associated with relatively few societies (such as the United States), has become globalized as well. Of course this is not an altogether new phenomenon. There was religious pluralism in the late Hellenistic period, along the Silk Road of Central Asia, in Moghul India, and in Hohenstaufen Sicily (typically concentrated in cities). But its scope and intensity today is unprecedented. The Roman Catholic church has always been a global institution. But today Pentecostal missionaries are active among the Mayas of Guatemala, in Nepal, and in Siberia. It is estimated that there are at least 250 million Pentecostals in the world today, most of them in countries that never experienced Protestantism before. The “Jesus movie,” produced by an American Evangelical organization, has been dubbed in more than a hundred languages and is shown in villages throughout India. But India is returning the compliment. Devotees of Krishna dance and chant in the cities of Europe and America. There are tens of thousands of converts to Buddhism in Western countries. And other examples exist around the world.

Religious pluralism has important consequences both on the institutional and individual consciousness levels. On the institutional level, it means that any religious monopoly comes to be undermined and eventually either greatly modified or relinquished. Religious institutions can no longer take for granted that a particular population will supinely submit to its authority. Rather, people have to be persuaded to accept such authority. Put differently, something like a religious market arises, and individuals now have choices. It is important to understand two aspects of this development. First, the process of religious pluralization is obviously enhanced if a sizable number of religious institutions are competing with each other (as has been the case in America ever since colonial times). Then the market effect of pluralism is patently obvious. But even if one religious tradition still counts the majority of the population as its nominal adherents, individuals have at least the choice of disaffiliating from the institution representing that tradition. In that case, there is a market with at least two competitors—the old institution and a diffused (although sometimes organized) community of the disaffiliated (the majority Catholic countries in Europe are good examples of this). And second, pluralism is equally obviously enhanced if there exists a politically established and legally guaranteed freedom of religion. In that case, the religious institutions can no longer rely on the state to fill their pews. This is the typical situation in liberal democracies. But religious freedom, sometimes within certain limits, has also been promoted under nondemocratic regions (for example, under the Habsburgs in Austria and the Hohenzollern in Prussia). Even if the state resists the spread of religious pluralism (as is the case today in a considerable number of countries), the latter will creep in nonetheless as a result of the aforementioned force of modernization and globalization.

The move of religion from taken-for-grantedness to the possibility of choices has important consequences on the level of individual consciousness. This means, quite simply, that religion moves from the level of subjectively self-evident truth to the level of decisions. Put differently, religious certainty is now harder to come by. A religious decision can be a matter of passionate commitment (as in Kierkegaard's "leap of faith") or, more commonly, it can be an emotionally low-intensity consumer option (as expressed in the telling American phrase of "religious preference"). In either case, the individual is thrown back on his own resources to reflect upon and somehow come to terms with his native religious tradition. This does not necessarily change what is believed and practiced, but it changes the how of belief and practice. And even if individuals decide to affirm a very conservative version of a tradition, they will know that they made this decision—that is, they cannot take it for granted—and, at least in principle, this decision may be revoked at some future time. Thus there is a mountain of difference between tradition and neotraditionalism.

Pluralism changes the relations between religious institutions and the adherents, the state, and each other. The laity, consisting of uncoerced consumers, gains power vis-à-vis the clergy or other religious authorities. The separation of state and religion becomes a social reality even before it is instituted in law. The different religious institutions become more respectful of each other and, sooner or later, are induced to cooperate in reducing or regulating the competition between them (the economic basis, so to speak, of ecumenicity). Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch classically distinguished between two social forms of religion—the church, into which one is born—and the sect, which one joins. Richard Niebuhr suggested that American religious history brought forth a third type—the denomination—an institution that has the characteristics of a church rather than a sect, but to which individuals adhere voluntarily and which accepts the right of existence of other churches. Denominations are voluntary religious associations. The pluralistic situation pressures churches to become de facto denominations, even if their theological self-understanding militates against such a status.

Neotraditionalism (or fundamentalism if you will—I don't much like this term) can take two forms. In both, there is a project of restoring taken-for-grantedness and certainty. The effort is made to convert the entire society into a social base in which a religious tradition will again be taken for granted. This will require a sort of totalitarian regime, because contacts with others who generate uncertainty must be tightly controlled. This project is difficult under modern conditions, as is shown by the fate of all totalitarian regimes today. Alternatively, a religious structure can be created, within which the tradition will once more be taken for granted. That, of course, is the classical sectarian option—a subculture of those who possess the alleged truth, leaving the wider culture to its own nefarious purposes. That option will require a kind of minitotalitarianism under contemporary conditions, because the turbulent world of pluralism outside the gates must be rigorously excluded, with tight controls over interaction and communication constantly maintained. That is rather difficult.

To sum up the preceding observations, the pluralist situation is characterized by religion losing its taken-for-granted status both in society and in the con-

sciousness of individuals. To survive effectively in this situation, a religious institution must develop the capacity to function as a denomination—that is, as a voluntary association; however, this social form may or may not be legitimated theologically. It may be said that, for well-known historical reasons, Protestantism has had a comparative advantage in this matter. (Although this is not true for every variety of Protestantism, but rather for what the British sociologist David Martin has aptly called the “Amsterdam-London-Boston bourgeois axis.”) The Roman Catholic Church, after a long period of fierce resistance, has come to adapt very successfully to the situation of pluralist competition, and has legitimated this adaptation theologically in the declarations on religious liberty, beginning with the Second Vatican Council.

(Significantly, an influential individual in this process was John Courtney Murray, an American Jesuit.)

Early Christianity, for obvious reasons, existed as a voluntary association both in the Greek and Latin-speaking regions of the Roman world. Following the Constantinian establishment, Eastern Christ-

ian Orthodoxy has existed in four social forms: (1) as a state church—first in Byzantium, then in Russia, then in the independent states emerging from the slow disintegration of the Ottoman empire; (2) as a more or less tolerated minority under Muslim rule, as in the Ottoman millet system; (3) as a persecuted community under Communist rule; and (4) as a diaspora community, principally in ethnic enclaves in Western Europe and America. It goes without saying that these forms of social existence are very different in character, but they have one important thing in common: Nothing in this history has prepared Orthodoxy for the possibility of functioning as a voluntary association.

One must not exaggerate this. There have been monastic and sectarian movements within Orthodoxy that were created and maintained by the voluntary actions of individuals. But for the predominant numbers of Orthodox, there has been a taken-for-granted unity between religion and community. Where Orthodoxy existed as the official church of the society, this unity was enforced by the power of the state. The only option for voluntary action was by way of dissidence (as, for example, in the case of the Old Believers in Russia). Of course there are always more or less fervent people, but this is another story. To be Orthodox under the millet system could be more or less comfortable, as Ottoman policies changed from time to time, but there was little choice about it. There was always the choice of converting to Islam, but such individual acts in no way enhanced the capacity of the Orthodox Church to function as a voluntary association. Obviously, to be Orthodox under Communist rule involved voluntary action, often of a very courageous kind, but the church was voluntary only in the limited sense that individuals could vol-

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untarily adhere to it at great personal cost. The church then was somewhat underground, certainly not to be taken for granted. But (as in the case of Muslim rule) the competition, if one calls it that, was between acceptance and dissidence. Finally, whether Orthodoxy has been taken for granted in the diaspora depends on the strength of ethnic identification: Where ethnic ties are strong, the unity between religion and community can indeed be taken for granted. Thus, for example, for many Greek-Americans, being Orthodox is still a matter of course. But as ethnic ties weaken with assimilation, this taken-for-granteness comes under increasing pressure. America is at the forefront of this development. The Orthodox churches, although still overwhelmingly organized in ethnically defined jurisdictions, are increasingly functioning as de facto voluntary organizations. With the notable exception of the OCA (the Orthodox Church in America, which in the 1960s self-consciously de-ethnicized itself), Orthodoxy in the United States is still unprepared for this change, both institutionally and theologically. As far as I know, the most concentrated theological reflection about Orthodoxy in the pluralist situation took place in the Russia diaspora in France, in and around the St. Serge Theological School in Paris. Some of the leading thinkers of this community—George Florovsky, Alexander Schmemmann, and John Meyendorff—moved to the United States and were influential in the formation of the OCA. Thus unity between religion and ethnicity has been undermined in an interesting way by the influx of a considerable number of converts to Orthodoxy, who, in becoming Orthodox, obviously do not thereby become Greek or Russian, for example.

The same history creates difficulty for the engagement of Orthodoxy with both liberal democracy and the market economy. Adherents of any religious tradition will have difficulties with democracy in cases where a democratically elected regime issues laws that are deemed to contradict divinely mandated norms. Witness, for example, the opposition to abortion or same-sex marriage by conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the United States. And the problem of the relation of the divine and secular is being passionately debated throughout the Islamic world and Israel. But the Orthodox idea of *sinfonia*—the harmonious unity between society, state, and church—constitutes a distinctive challenge to the acceptance of liberal democracy, making the latter only slightly preferable to anarchy. Comparable Orthodox ideas about communal solidarity (Russian *sobornost*) make it difficult to accept a market economy based on competition and individual entrepreneurship. The market economy (or capitalism, which amounts to the same thing) is seen as a morally repulsive expression of ruthlessness and greed.

It is once again worthwhile to point out that Roman Catholicism has had very similar difficulties. It came to terms with liberal democracy in the Second Vatican Council and since then, as Samuel Huntington has pointed out, the Roman church has been a potent proponent of democracy in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe, and in the Philippines. Acceptance of the market economy has been slower, but that also has begun to happen since the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* of John Paul II. I think it is fair to say that, thus far, Orthodoxy has not produced a figure comparable to John Courtney Murray. (I stipulate that, possibly, Orthodoxy may not want to produce such a figure.)

The challenge of global pluralism will take different forms in different parts of the Orthodox world. In all likelihood, Russia is the only country in which something like this traditional *sinfonia* has a chance of being reestablished. Especially since the coming of the Putin administration, there have been some hesitant steps toward identifying the state with Orthodoxy. The 1997 law on religion has guaranteed the rights of long-standing religious minorities, but has sought to limit the inroads of newer religious groups (such as Evangelical Protestants and Mormons). One may call this a project of controlled pluralism. I would find it difficult to predict the further course of this development, which will depend on the unpredictable course of Russian politics and especially on the need of the state to legitimate itself in religious terms.

In the Balkans, the challenge of pluralism is directly linked to the relations with Europe, more specifically with what I have called “Eurosecularity.” As the recent debate over the constitution of the European Union has shown, there is a militant secularism (French-style *laïcité*) emanating from Brussels, and it is very powerful indeed. But there is now an established European culture of secularity that exerts a powerful influence apart from the political and legal actions of the EU. It has dramatically changed the place of religion in Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal), in Ireland, and at least incipiently in Poland. Greece is the one Orthodox country that has already been under the full impact of this secularity—as far as I know, with similar consequences. It remains to be seen what will happen in Romania and Bulgaria as they accede to the EU. I am not in a position to speculate about the situation in Cyprus, Georgia, and Armenia, but I will allow myself one sociological prediction: The closer a society moves toward Europe, the more it will come under the influence of European secularity. I doubt that Orthodoxy can bestow immunity against this process. (I cannot discuss here the possibility of whether European culture itself may change in this regard. If it does, an important factor will be the challenge of Islam within as well as on the borders of Europe, a religious community that largely refuses to play by the rules of *laïcité*.)

The situation of the Orthodox communities in the Middle East is quite different. Here the challenge is not from secularity, but from a militant and aggressive Islamism. It has already led to a painful demographic hemorrhage, as sizable numbers of Christians have opted to emigrate. This is particularly poignant in the case of the Palestinian territories. “Imagine a Bethlehem without Christians!” as the mayor of that city recently exclaimed. The future fate of Orthodoxy in this region will depend on overall political developments, about which the Orthodox have virtually no influence.

I would say that the most interesting challenge of pluralism is occurring in North America, especially in the United States, where there are approximately five million Orthodox. (Since the U.S. census is not allowed to ask questions about religion, information about religious statistics is notoriously unreliable.) Here the Orthodox churches increasingly exist as *de facto* voluntary associations, even if they are very reluctant to acknowledge this fact theologically or institutionally. It will be interesting to observe the future course of American Orthodoxy

as it copes with the challenge of a highly dynamic religious pluralism—which, to boot, exists in the most religious country in the Western world.

I have described neotraditionalism (conventionally labeled “fundamentalism”) as a project to restore the taken-for-granted status of religion, either macro or micro sociologically—that is, either as the *reconquista* of the entire society in the name of a religious tradition or as the construction of tightly controlled religious subcultures. Russia is the only country in which the *reconquista* version of neotraditionalism might have a fighting chance, but I would not bet on it. The subcultural version of neotraditionalism is possible in the other three regions: under benign circumstances in Europe and North America and under very unfortunate circumstances in the Middle East. With the exception of the Middle East, there is an alternative to neotraditionalism—in the form of the voluntary association (the denomination, if you will), which deliberately engages in the competitive dynamic of the pluralist situation. The number of converts to Orthodoxy in Western countries suggests that this is not a hopeless project. But it

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is all the more important to point out that this option is not without a serious risk—that engagement with all those outsiders leads to a progressive dilution of the religious substance, as all sorts of ideational and practical compromises are made. The fate of mainline Protestantism in America provides an important illustration of this risk. A certain climax of this development is represented by the Unitarians, who do not define themselves in terms of any distinctive doctrine or practice, but as a “community of seekers.” (Hence the telling joke: How does the Unitarian version of the Lord’s Prayer begin? “To Whom it May Concern.”)

Broadly speaking, a religious community facing contemporary pluralism has three options—to resist, withdraw from, or engage with pluralism. The preceding observations should have made it clear that none of these options is without difficulties and risks. All that social science can do is to describe the context in which institutional and individual decisions have to be made, and perhaps to point out that there are no risk-free options in the real world. Both institutions and individuals must decide what to do on the basis of their own values. In this case, the decisions must come from within the Orthodox community. However, before I close, I will explain why, as a sympathetic outsider, I hope that the decisions are made in favor of engagement with pluralism, rather than either of the two neotraditionalist options. This hope is not primarily because engagement is most compatible with liberal democracy. (This is not the place to state my bias in favor of democracy, except to say that it is not because of some utopian notion of democracy as the ideal regime, but rather on the empirical grounds that, under modern conditions, democracy is the most likely form of government to avoid

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tyranny and to make possible a modicum of decency in society.) Rather, my bias here comes from my hope for a vital Christianity in our time. Put succinctly, I think that the Orthodox witness is very much needed in our time.

Since the beginnings of the ecumenical movement, Orthodoxy has indeed performed a sort of witness in places like the World Council of Churches or, in the United States, the National Council of Churches. It has reminded Protestantism that there is another Christian option, beside themselves and Rome. Much of the time the Orthodox representatives in these ecumenical organizations have said no to various Protestant initiatives. Given the inanities that have constituted many of the political pronouncements of these organizations, this has been a useful service. But I think it is fair to say that Orthodoxy as a distinctive Christian tradition has made little impact on its ecumenical interlocutors.

What does engagement mean? It means, quite simply, that the tradition is carried into the open discourse of the culture. And this further means that those who represent the tradition make unapologetic truth claims. This will inevitably lead to charges of proselytizing. It is a curious term, which has lately become pejorative in polite society. Yet what it essentially means is that one tries to convince others of the truths to which one is committed. A self-confident community will usually do just that. Let me put it bluntly. Instead of worrying that Mormons will steal Orthodox souls, the Orthodox should make efforts to steal Mormon souls.

A curious social-psychological fact is relevant to this (perhaps politically incorrect) suggestion: When a religious tradition is no longer taken for granted, the boundary between insiders and outsiders becomes blurred. One can no longer assume that the next generation will automatically adhere to one's tradition. Children will ask questions, and they will have to be persuaded that the tradition is worth adhering to. But the arguments used in such exercises of persuasion—arguments pointing out the truth, the values, and the beauty of the tradition—are the same as the arguments made to explain the tradition to an inquiring outsider. In other words, one must proselytize within the community, even if one refrains from doing so outside of it, otherwise one will lose the children. In a pluralist society, children of different communities talk to each other. I am pretty sure that in Salt Lake City, some Greek Orthodox children play with the Mormon children next-door.

I am not a theologian, but let me stick my neck out and mention some aspects of the Orthodox witness that other Christians need. There is, above all, the transcendent character of Orthodox worship and piety. One need only spend a few minutes attending an Orthodox liturgy to realize that what is going on here refers to a reality that utterly transcends the realities of the empirical world. The liturgy, in its words and its actions (*legoumena* and *dromena*), refers to a drama of redemption embracing the entire cosmos, and everything else is subordinated to this message. This stands in stark contrast to what can be described as the internal secularization that has occurred in much of Western Christianity (especially in its mainline Protestant branches, but, to a lesser extent, in Roman Catholicism as well). Here the Gospel has been reduced to a trivial moralism, to a therapeutic recipe or, worst of all, a political agenda. Every Orthodox liturgy is a liberating witness against these deformations.

Orthodoxy contains a distinctive treasury of wisdom about the human condition. Paul Evdokimov (one of the most interesting figures of the Russian diaspora in France, whose thought Michael Plekon has tirelessly made accessible in English translation) nicely sums this up. Evdokimov suggests that Western Christianity (both in its Catholic and Protestant forms) has placed the relationship between God and man in a courtroom. There is an essentially juridical process of debt, third-party payment, and forgiveness of the debt. Perhaps this is due to the powerful legacy of the Latin legal mind. By contrast, the East places the divine-human interaction in a hospital. To be sure, the dogmatic statements about sin and atonement may be similar in East and West, but they occur in two very different contexts of piety, in which sin is understood as just a part of the overall human sickness. It seems to me that this is a more compassionate anthropology (perhaps most eloquently expressed in some of Dostoyevsky's novels).

I will only take one gingerly step into a particular theological minefield—the issue of the *filioque*, which has been a major source of contention between Orthodoxy and the West. The Latin phrase refers to an insertion by the Western church into the text of the Nicene Creed. It originally stated that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father;” the West, for reasons that are somewhat obscure, added the words “and from the Son” (*filioque*). The East passionately rejected this addition, pronouncing it as heresy that justifies the great schism with the West. The theological controversy, as is usually the case, was mixed in with murky political interests, notably between Rome and Constantinople. I have at least a sketchy understanding of the theological motives on both sides, but it seems to me that the Orthodox position embodies a more dynamic understanding of the role of the Spirit in the world, an understanding that may prove fruitful in the great dialogue that is on the horizon today—the dialogue between Christianity and the other world religions.

Finally, Orthodoxy, in contrast with the West, focuses more on Easter than on Good Friday, on the Resurrection as the focal point of the cosmic drama of redemption. Once again the dogmatic formulations may be the same or very similar, but they are animated by very different forms of piety. The West (Catholic as well as Protestant) has developed a deeply penitential piety, steeped in a gloomy consciousness of guilt and sin. By contrast, the East has been fixated on the figure of what Gustav Aulen (a Swedish Lutheran theologian) has called *Christus Victor*, the triumphant conqueror of both sin and death. This figure looks down on most Orthodox churches as the icon of the Pantocrator. It is a very liberating figure.

I will not venture any further onto the thin ice of theological speculation. Let me end with an episode from the time of the Soviet Union. In one periodic antireligious campaign, a Communist commissar called together the inhabitants of a village and harangued them for an hour about the illusions of religious superstition and the virtues of scientific atheism. He then said, generously, that he would give the village priest five minutes for a response. The priest said that he did not need five minutes. He came up, turned to the assembled villagers, and said “Christ is risen!” The villagers responded: “He is risen indeed!” The priest then stepped back. The story does not tell what the commissar said after that.

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