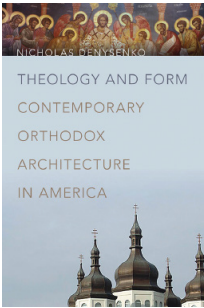


# Peeling Back the Onion Dome: Review of Nicholas Denysenko, *Theology and Form: Contemporary Orthodox Architecture in America*

Joseph L. Clarke



Nicholas Denysenko, *Theology and Form: Contemporary Orthodox Architecture in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017)

Few endeavors test a parish's collective determination and mutual goodwill like the construction of a new building, or the renovation of an existing one. Even a modest building is a tangible manifestation of a community's distinctive character and of the public face it wishes to present. Like liturgy itself, the church structure plays a crucial role in orienting participants in relation to one another and to the world. Church architecture raises particularly complex questions in contemporary North America, where Orthodoxy not only exists within a pluralistic society, but is itself a pluralistic institution, comprising a range of canonical jurisdictions, ethnic histories and sensibilities, and pastoral approaches.

Nicholas Denysenko's intriguing book *Theology and Form: Contemporary Orthodox Architecture in America* explores this state of affairs by profiling seven contemporary American Orthodox Christian communities and their buildings. It joins other recent sociologically-oriented studies by authors such as Michael Plekon and D. Oliver Herbel in exploring the diverse ways Orthodox faith is lived in the modern world. This approach makes the book a valuable contribution to the scholarship on Orthodox church architecture, which otherwise tends to be historical in nature, and largely focuses either

on a small number of outstanding structures or on very general trends.

An important leitmotif in Denysenko's case studies is his critique of the proposition that religious architecture is—or should be—a direct reflection of liturgy. Much of the academic literature on early Byzantine architecture has focused on how the spatial arrangements of early Constantinopolitan churches developed to accommodate the ritual movements of church services. The scholars Thomas Mathews and Robert Taft both borrowed the modernist architectural maxim “form follows function” to describe such a correspondence.<sup>1</sup> Neither claimed that this principle held universally, but their formulation was still pithy enough to have served as a foil for more recent revisionist studies, which have emphasized the indirect and historically fluctuating relationships between Byzantine liturgy and church architecture.<sup>2</sup>

*Theology and Form* aligns itself with this more recent work, even though it is not a historical study, and its author is not an architectural historian but a scholar of sacramental theology and an Orthodox deacon. The book contributes to the debate about architecture and liturgy in a different way: by examining the multiplicity of factors beyond liturgy that can account for

<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 4; Robert F. Taft, S.J., *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 33.

the form of a contemporary Orthodox church building. These factors include ethnic identity, collective memory, and various ideas of mission, as well as non-liturgical functions such as church school, coffee hour, and parish ministries.

The first chapter of *Theology and Form* examines the history of premodern Orthodox church buildings. This highly condensed and fragmentary account is no substitute for a bona fide architectural history of Orthodox churches, but Denysenko merely sets out to demonstrate that the Orthodox church building is not a fixed, unchanging architectural type, and to introduce some of the key historical precedents on which many American Orthodox communities have modeled their buildings.

*Theology and Form* then moves into its analysis of the seven churches. In choosing specimens to examine, Denysenko's aim was not to include every canonical jurisdiction in the United States, but rather to consider a representative cross-section of community types found in American Orthodoxy. His cases are:

- a Ukrainian immigrant parish that uses its new building, patterned after a medieval Ukrainian cathedral, as a center for cultivating ethnic identity;
- an English-language OCA parish oriented toward evangelization and interfaith ministry, whose new building lacks discernably "Orthodox" elements on the exterior;
- a ROCOR cathedral with a full cycle of daily liturgical observances, modeled on a late medieval Russian church and densely filled with icons and relics;

- a Greek Orthodox church whose parishioners hired the modern architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design their building in the 1950s, as a symbol of their arrival in the American middle class;
- a seminary chapel whose domestic scale and open interior reflect academic exploration of liturgical theology;
- a monastery church whose design reinterprets medieval Byzantine practices to reflect the contemporary values of lay participation and ecumenical dialogue; and
- a small OCA mission occupying a strip mall storefront.

As may be imagined, the faithful who worship at these churches subscribe to quite diverse views about what a church building should look like and how it should be used. Denysenko vividly describes the internal dynamics of each community and the role of architecture in its social and liturgical life—in several cases with firsthand knowledge, as a result of his extended personal experience as a church member. He eschews first-person narrative, however, in favor of a more objective stance toward the objects of his investigation. Each case is thoroughly researched through detailed examination of church archives and interviews with parishioners. To illustrate the case studies, the author mostly uses his own photographs, which provide a more frank view of the church buildings than staged professional photos would. This is a sensible strategy, though one would have liked to see floor plans or other architectural drawings of each of the buildings, which would have allowed easier comparison of the examples.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Vasileios Marinis, *Architecture and Ritual in the Churches of Constantinople: Ninth to Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 114–118.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, revised ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Cutler, "The Tyranny of Hagia Sophia: Notes on Greek Orthodox Church Design in the United States," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 31:1 (March 1972): 38–50.

The book does not claim that its cases are examples of outstanding architectural merit. Rather, it endeavors to show how each building—from sumptuous cathedral to unassuming storefront church—reflects the values of its particular users, and thus has lessons to offer. Readers with a particular interest in modern architectural history may be reminded of the early years of postmodernism, when leading American architects rediscovered the value of vernacular structures. In the late 1960s, architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown undertook a “nonjudgmental” study of the unpretentious commercial buildings of Las Vegas (this was well before the city was overrun with luxury hotels and multimillion-dollar ensembles). While most of the architectural intelligentsia remained in the thrall of International Style steel-and-glass boxes, Venturi and Scott Brown praised the vitality and messiness of urban environments that thrived outside the ken of academic theory. Adopting populist maxims such as “Billboards are Almost All Right,” they argued that even seemingly crass commercial structures could teach architects a lot about what made the physical environment meaningful to everyday users.<sup>3</sup>

In an analogous way, *Theology and Form* maintains that there is more than one right way to fashion a church building. This is not to say that all seven narratives end happily. Some are tales of recurrent frustrations, of long-term building plans that did not work out as expected, necessitating strategic reassessments. A poignant exam-

ple is the mission that moved into the strip mall almost ten years ago, with high hopes of soon graduating to become a full-fledged parish. It failed to grow. As its mission status lengthened to become more or less permanent, the church continued to embellish its makeshift environment bit by bit, amassing an eclectic collection of donated icons and relics. The resulting church building is one that no priest or architect would consciously have set out to construct. Yet through its difficult evolution, it has acquired a distinctive character, and has become symptomatic, in its own way, of the current state of American Orthodoxy.

*Theology and Form* offers particular insight into communities such as this, whose limited means have obliged them to make do with improvised architectural arrangements that could hardly be more different from the resplendent cathedrals built in ages past through imperial patronage. As Denysenko tells it, these parishes should not be overlooked in a study of contemporary church architecture just because their worship spaces do not conform to an inherited ideal—what one historian has called “the tyranny of Hagia Sophia.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, they should be celebrated as the laboratories where a new Orthodox architecture, uniquely suited to the North American context, is taking shape.

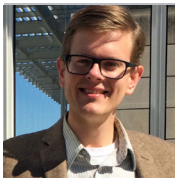
Denysenko’s decision to suspend artistic judgment on the cases he examines ensures the book’s rigor, though it also lends a note of relativism to his analysis. Are all seven church buildings really equally successful

at imaging the divine kingdom and furthering the proclamation of the gospel? While determinations of this nature lie beyond the scope of *Theology and Form*, Denysenko does draw other important conclusions from his analysis. He proposes three broad categories in which American Orthodox churches can be grouped: the “immigrant model,” which focuses on emulating architectural styles from abroad and preserving ethnic character; the “liturgical renewal model,” which excavates the Orthodox theological tradition to inform new architectural strategies; and the “American Church model,” which emphasizes integration of the church building into the local context, often through the selective adoption of motifs from American Protestant church architecture.

This threefold distinction is especially useful, because it helps explain why the architectural heterogeneity apparent in American Orthodoxy is not merely incidental. Variations in building form manifest an underlying diversity of ideas about what a church is, and about the stance Orthodox Christians should adopt in

relation to American society at large. This diversity underscores the most important message of *Theology and Form*: that although Orthodox believers are united by a shared liturgy, in North America at least, there can be no one-size-fits-all archetype for church buildings.

Scholars of modern American Christianity will find that this book helps bridge the gap between the historical study of Orthodox buildings and the realities of church architecture in a pluralistic society. In doing so, it underscores just how complex the relationships between theology and form really are, and how the negotiation of these relationships in three dimensions is entangled with big, contested questions about modern Orthodox identity. And while *Theology and Form* is by no means an architectural pattern book, it will be of great interest to those embarking on church-building projects who wish to think beyond pastiches of “old world” styles, and to learn from the surprising variety of spatial practices that have evolved as Orthodox Christianity has taken root on this continent. ✱



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