

Faith and Ideology: Review of Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*

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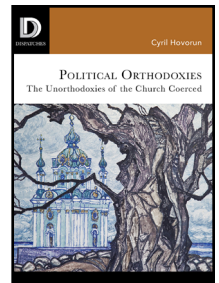
What is Christianity? What is the fundamental message of the gospel? These simple questions invite clear and concise responses, but among the churches there is no shortage of complex expressions of Christian identity. One reason for this complexity is that the message of the gospel has often been fused with ideologies to advance worldly political objectives since the first centuries of Christianity. In recent times, Orthodox churches have developed robust new political theologies, especially in post-Soviet contexts, as demonstrated by an impressive cohort of scholars studying political theology.

Cyril Hovorun contributes to this discussion with a new and much-needed study of contemporary “political Orthodoxies” that illuminates the complicity of the Orthodox Church in fusing ideologies with Christian theology. Hovorun describes the problem of political Orthodoxy aptly: it is not authentic theology, but rather “ideologies dressed in the robes of theology” (7).

Hovorun’s study explores the origins of modern political Orthodoxies in the forms of fundamentalism, antisemitism, and nationalism. First, after a brief overview of older religious doctrines associated with political agendas, such as Arianism, iconoclasm, and the ecclesial principle of hierarchy, Hovorun discusses the concepts of secularism, civil religion, and political religion. This initial discussion lays

the groundwork for his case studies of modern political Orthodoxies, each of which has employed coercion to “force people to subscribe to its credo” (38). Readers will benefit especially from Hovorun’s treatment of secularism, as he shows how religious opposition to it tends to result in the adoption of alternative ideologies that are incompatible with the gospel (22).

The remainder of Hovorun’s study examines particular Orthodox ideologies such as antimodernism, monarchism, and conservatism, which tend to evolve into dangerous political religions. Hovorun’s study presents case studies of coercive political religions from Greece, Romania, and Russia. He is careful to illuminate the complex historical contexts that provided the formative environments for civil and political religions to develop in each case. For example, Hovorun describes the formation of Greek civil religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as having been “archetypal” for Orthodox countries (especially in the Balkans) seeking emancipation from the Ottoman rule (48). He offers a similarly sensitive account of the creation of an independent Romania from regions previously belonging to the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires. In each of these cases, as the nation disentangled itself from a complex imperial legacy, the Church assumed a central role in its new historical narrative. This swelling of national pride



Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

could be costly for other citizens. For example, Romania granted special status to people of Dacian identity. Hovorun shows how political religion resulted in racism in this case, with Jews at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in Romania in the 1930s (66).

Hovorun also treats the emergence of the *Russkiy Mir* (“Russian World”) idea in post-Soviet Russia, which has fused elements of pre-revolutionary and Soviet ideology (75–87). As in the cases of Greece and Romania, here the reconstruction of ideological principles into a neo-imperial politics occurred during a period of adjustment following the collapse of a multinational empire. Hovorun argues that *Russkiy Mir* became a coercive political religion that cast Russia in a messianic role as a saving civilization in a secularist world. Hence, when Ukraine demonstrated its commitment to integration with the West during the Maidan Revolution of 2013–14, Russia responded by annexing Crimea and waging war in the Donbas region (95–7). Hovorun demonstrates how *Russkiy Mir*, which is endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church, has been cited to justify coercive and even violent measures. In identifying Russian civilization as the defender of Orthodoxy from a secularized West, this political religion amounts to a form of Occidentalism.

Some readers may be offended by Hovorun’s study because his explanations of the formation of political Orthodoxies do not conceal the identities of traditional heroes of Orthodoxy. He shows how respected figures such as Nicolae Iorga and Mircea Eliade con-

tributed to the formation of civil and political religion. Hovorun also exposes the antisemitic policies of Tsar Nicholas II and the revival of antisemitism in the writings of Metropolitan Tikhon (Shekhunov), the rumored father confessor of President Vladimir Putin. Others will disparage Hovorun for criticizing Russian political religion and coercion at length without mentioning the problems caused by nationalism in his native country of Ukraine. Yet recently, Hovorun has become perhaps the most outspoken critic of the swift formation of civil religion in Ukraine during the process of autocephaly granted to Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Hovorun’s study should prompt scholars to continue their critical assessment of political Orthodoxy. His book also invites theologians and church leaders to reflect critically upon the official statements and positions of their churches. The most obvious benefit of this book is the liberation of the gospel from political agendas in countries with large Orthodox populations, so that the Church might articulate a clear response to the fundamental question, “What is Christianity?” Hovorun’s study may also encourage the Church’s much-needed disavowal of ideologies that coerce people into adopting political positions. The book convincingly demonstrates the direct relationship between political Orthodoxies and the endorsement of racism, demonization of others, and violence. It is not too late for the Orthodox Church to break its silence and to condemn atrocities committed in the name of political religion. ✱



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