

Orthodox and White?

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On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant, a self-proclaimed white supremacist from Australia, shot up two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing fifty men, women, and children at prayer. The 76-page manifesto he published online prior to the attack contains some of the predictable code terms that litter white supremacist and nationalist literature, websites, and social media threads everywhere, such as “the complete racial and cultural replacement of the European people” and “mass invasion.” Significant for Orthodox Christians, however, were the mention of Chetniks on his gun cartridges and a reference to the American white supremacist Dylann Roof in the manifesto. The Chetniks was a Serbian guerrilla nationalist group that first resisted the Ottomans and later the Axis powers, and was reestablished during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. The Chetniks were especially famous for their ideology of “cleansing” the Serbian land of non-Serbs, for the practice of genocidal violence, and for strong connections to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Dylann Roof, who killed nine people in the 2015 shooting at Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, had connections to a local Orthodox priest. Father John Parker—now the dean of St. Tikhon’s Seminary—was identified by Roof’s defense team as his “spiritual advisor” and named as a defense witness

in the trial (though at Roof’s behest, he ultimately did not testify).¹ This is not to impute Roof’s extreme racist views to Father Parker—who publicly denounced the shooting—but rather to point out how attractive Orthodox Christianity often seems to nationalists and white supremacists, including Parker’s own spiritual ward.

This episode is but the latest in a series of news stories, blogs, and social media trails that point to the growing white supremacist cancer within Orthodoxy. The “Orthodox story” of the leaders of the American white supremacist group Traditionalist Worker Party, Matt Parrott and Matthew Heimbach, has been told many times. In spite of being excommunicated by their Antiochian Orthodox priest in the wake of a media outcry, both men continue to identify as Orthodox, and appear to have found spiritual shelters in Orthodox parishes.² But while Heimbach has enjoyed considerable media coverage, his association with Orthodoxy is by no means exceptional. On the contrary, on social media, especially in the recent years of emboldened xenophobia and white nationalism, one finds these sentiments widely shared in self-styled “traditionalist” Orthodox circles. From the ambo and on social media, clergy make xenophobic remarks that go unchallenged. And there is a fad among Orthodox clergy and laity of posting

¹ Tim Smith, “Community Reacts to Roof Death Sentence,” *Greenville News*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.greenvilleonline.com/story/news/2017/01/10/community-reacts-roof-death-sentence/96385008/>.

² While the identity and jurisdiction of these parishes cannot be confirmed, Parrott, Heimbach, and their allies insist that they have been accepted as communicants in the ROCOR. See, for example, Ryan Hunter, “My Interview with Matthew Heimbach,” *Orthodox in the District*, June 26, 2015, <https://ryanphunter.wordpress.com/2015/06/26/my-interview-with-matthew-heimbach/>.

Members of Русское национальное единство (Russian National Unity), a neo-Nazi paramilitary organization that continues the legacy of the Black Hundreds movement, pose in front of a monastery in Diveyevo, Russia, c. 2002.



Confederate flags superimposed with “IC XC NIKA” as Facebook profile pictures.

Furthermore, among the examples that go beyond casual comments is a lecture course by a notorious culture warrior, Father Josiah Trenham of anti-LGBTQ fame. Trenham’s course, titled “Patriotism: The Duty of a Christian to His Nation,” is meant “to ignite the waning fires of patriotic love in the hearts of believers,” according to the website that distributes it.⁴ Especially notable is the title of the fourth lecture, “American Degradation,” a phrase that clearly resonates with alt-right and white supremacist panic around “degeneracy.” The idea behind this term is that America has become a degenerate nation because of the growth of LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, the ending of interracial marriage prohibitions, and so forth. By invoking “American degradation,” Trenham is situating himself within a very long rhetorical tradition of the far right, which presents itself in opposition to an existential threat to the nation, culture, race, or *Volk*. The threat is never the degradation or degeneration itself, but a particular

group of people, whether Jews, “cultural Marxists,” the LGBT community, Muslims, immigrants, or other perceived enemies of the (white, straight, male) body politic. Those enemies are said to bring about degradation as part of a broader, generally clandestine assault on the dominant culture.

In his well-researched article “East of Eden,” Jon Phillips examines the attraction of white nationalists to Orthodox Christianity. The article presents an uncomfortable but honest picture of the Orthodox Church’s uneasy relationship with nationalist ideologies, with antisemitism, and with traditionally conservative views on social justice and human rights issues. Phillips writes:

The resurgence of fascist groups in largely Orthodox countries across Eastern Europe, from political parties like Greece’s Golden Dawn and Ukraine’s Svoboda to Orthodox ultranationalist groups like Russia’s Narodny Sobor and Romania’s Noua Dreapta, have reinforced the perception among white nationalists that the Church

⁴ Patristic Nectar Publications, https://patristicnectar.org/bookstore_181018_2.html.

might be an ally in their war against Judaism, homosexuality, multiculturalism, feminism and the other forces of “cultural Marxism.” Even non-Christians in these communities seem to think that Orthodox Christianity is special, leaving comments like this statement from a self-professed atheist on VNN [the Vanguard News Network]: “At the end of the day, the countries who have Orthodox populations have remained more racially and culturally sound than the nations with no religion or worse, Protestantism. The Orthodox base is a major reason why Greeks, Russians and Serbs understand the Jewish question far better than any member of your college Atheists club.”⁵

The most notorious antisemitic text of modern history, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, originated in 1902 in Russia, and was published in 1905 and widely disseminated by the Orthodox missionary writer Sergei Nilus. While the *Protocols* are today recognized as a libelous forgery and have been banned in various countries—including Russia, where they are now counted as extremist literature—they have never been officially declared a forgery by the Russian Church or any of the other Orthodox churches. Worse, the original publication of the *Protocols* was blessed by Saint John of Kronstadt, himself well known for his support of the ultra-nationalistic and antisemitic Russian militia the Black Hundreds.⁶ The status of the *Protocols* has been “sanctified” by other famous figures of the Russian Church, such as the new martyr Metropolitan Vladimir of Moscow (subsequently Kiev), the elders of Optina Varsonuphiy and Nektariy, and Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is only one of the many texts that the Orthodox Church is unable or unwilling to reckon with, thereby providing fodder for extremist nationalist ideologies. *Adversus Judaeos*, the infamous corpus of sermons by John Chrysostom—one of the greatest saints and liturgists of the Church—is widely quoted in Orthodox antisemitic writings and in sermons, the latter especially during Holy Week, to complement the anti-Jewish texts of liturgical services in which the Jews are emphatically identified as the killers of Christ, who are ultimately to be destroyed by the power of the cross.⁷ The hymnody of the Sunday of the Cross in Great Lent mentions how, by the power of the cross, “our faithful kings laid low . . . the people of Ishmael,” that is, the Arab Muslims. And these are only the best-known examples. While every one of these more ancient texts has to be viewed in its own historical and cultural context, the fact remains that collectively they constitute an element of Orthodox tradition that is uncritically accepted and even embraced, despite a centuries-long history of Christians’ persecution of religious minorities and despite the atrocities of the two world wars.

Furthermore, unlike most Western churches, which continue to process the troubling legacy of Christian xenophobia, the Orthodox Church resists acknowledging it as an internal problem. If one studies official church documents, it becomes apparent that denunciations of racism, xenophobia, and similar issues almost always point outward. When pressed on the matter, Orthodox hierarchs staunchly refuse to accept the systemic nature of the problem, at best distancing themselves from particularly egregious examples of xenophobic behavior, such as in the cases of the late Metropoli-

⁵ Jon Phillips, “East of Eden,” *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report*, Winter 2014, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2014/east-eden>.

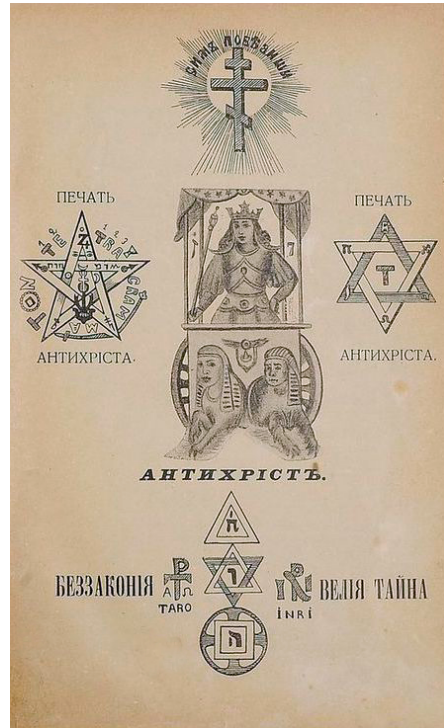
⁶ Ivan Kontsevich. *Пламенная любовь Памяти С. А. Нилуса* (New York, NY, 1937), 6. See Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 396.

⁷ “For by your lifting up today the Hebrew race perished.” Stikhera on the Praises, Matins of Holy Friday.

Frontispiece of a 1912 edition of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in a book by Sergei Nilus. The caption above the Orthodox cross reads "Thus we shall win."

tan John (Snychev) of Ladoga (an infamous ultraconservative monarchist and public antisemite, associated with the groups who advocated for the glorification of Grigory Rasputin and Ivan IV), Heimbach, and two other famous actors of the American Orthodox ultra-nationalist blogosphere: Brother Nathaniel Kapner (a self-proclaimed "monastic of Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia" and a notorious antisemitic agitator) and "Father" Matthew Raphael Johnson (a deposed priest of a schismatic Old Calendarist Greek Orthodox church and a member of Heimbach's Traditionalist Worker Party). In the meantime, even in the wake of World War II, nationalist and antisemitic views have not been viewed as an impediment to the glorification of new saints such as John of Kronstadt, Nicholas of Zhicha, and, most recently, Seraphim Sobolev. In the Orthodox countries of the former Eastern bloc, the antisemitic and islamophobic pronouncements and "prophesies" of various Athonite and Pochaev elders are widely sold in parish bookstores and published on Orthodox websites.

Even more scandalously, in 2012, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow visited and venerated the relics of an apocryphal "child martyr," Gabriel of Białystok, the hero of an infamous eighteenth century blood libel story held sacred in Poland and Belarus. "The Life of the Holy Child-Martyr Gabriel" tells of a six-year-old Christian boy purported to have been kidnapped, tortured and ritually murdered (crucified and exsanguinated) by Jews as part of the Passover revelries. The local cult of Gabriel dates back to the mid-eighteenth century, but according to evidence presented in the nineteenth century by Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow and the preeminent Russian church historian Yevg-



eny Golubinsky, Gabriel was never actually canonized. Metropolitan Philaret especially wrote against the veneration of this apocryphal character. In spite of his warning, the cult continued to smolder locally, and was then widely elevated at the end of the nineteenth century on a wave of anti-Jewish sentiment in the western provinces of the Russian Empire. The cult eventually fell back into near-oblivion, but was resurrected by the Nazi occupiers in Belarus and again in the 1990s on the nationalist crest of the "Russian Religious Renewal." Veneration of Gabriel has perennially focused on the image of a Christ-like victim of the Jews, always identified as the "Christ-killers." It is worth noting that this fake "child martyr" has made his way into the rubrics of Orthodox Church in America and into the reliquary of at least one of its Midwestern parishes.

White supremacists mining the Orthodox tradition for reinforcement of their racist ideologies have been finding nourishment not only in historical and “Old World” sources, but also in popular American Orthodox resources. Consider this excerpt from a familiar and widely published catechetical book by the eminent Orthodox ethicist and theologian Father Stanley Harakas, *The Orthodox Church: 455 Questions and Answers*:

[Question:] No matter what Hollywood and the Church say, I can’t believe God smiles on such [interracial] marriages. . . .

[Answer:] I wish to respond to the brief comment on several levels. On the level of the issue itself, the expression “God smiles on such marriages” can be understood in a number of ways. If by it, you mean that you believe that God does not encourage racially mixed marriages, then, I believe we are not in disagreement. I feel that I made it very clear that the Church does not feel that such marriages are desirable, for many different reasons, many of which are practical and have to do with the chance of success for such marriages. In addition, we should also add that the Church holds that the races and nations were created by God. Consequently, total racial intermarriage would destroy the races which God created. The Church has never advocated or encouraged racially mixed marriages.

Nevertheless, to assume a stance that would completely prohibit such marriages, would mean that the Church was racist, in that the criterion which it used was not one of faith, or belief, or the equal dignity of all human beings as the “image and likeness of

God,” but solely a racial criterion. This it has never done, nor can it do so and remain faithful to its teachings. If by the idea that “God does not smile on such marriages,” you are saying that God absolutely prohibits these marriages, then, I believe the burden of proof is on you—since we have no New Testament teaching, nor canonical directives, nor Church practice to that effect.⁸

The endurance of this passage through several reprints of what has been considered a staple catechetical book since its first publication in 1987 is significant. This is not a blog post by an obscure author, but a treatise by one of the preeminent American Orthodox theological educators, many of whose texts elucidating the Orthodox position on contemporary social issues reside on the website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America. Father Harakas’s response originally appeared in *The Hellenic Chronicle*, a conservative Greek-American newspaper associated with resistance to Greek immigrants’ assimilation into American society and to intermarriage with non-Greeks. But if the context of his remarks is different from that of Slavic antisemitism, the upshot is the same. Sentiments like this stand in direct opposition to Saint Paul’s declaration that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3:28).

Moreover, while today many American Orthodox Christians like to point out that, in 1965, Archbishop Iakovos of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama, they often forget to mention two significant details. First, this episode remains one isolated example of an Orthodox hierarch joining the fight for civil liberties. Second and no less important

⁸ Stanley Harakas. *The Orthodox Church: 455 Questions and Answers*. (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing Company, 1987), 137.

Image used as profile picture and shared on Facebook and Twitter by numerous Orthodox clergy and laity, especially in the wake of the Confederate statues removal controversy.

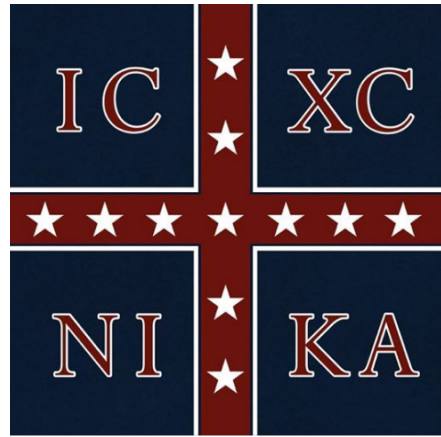
is the treatment Archbishop Iakovos suffered afterwards at the hands of his own spiritual flock, ranging from being disinvented from his continued pastoral visits to Southern parishes to hate mail to death threats.⁹

⁹ Michael N. Varlamos, "His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos & The Civil Rights Movement: Selma, 1965," *March on Selma: Orthodoxy and the Civil Rights Movement*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America, <https://civilrights.goarch.org/introduction>.

¹⁰ Lawrence Farley, "Gender Confusion and the Extinction of True Manhood," *No Other Foundation*, February 15, 2009, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/notherfoundation/gender-confusion-and-the-extinction-of-true-manhood/>. Frederica Mathewes-Green, "Why Orthodox Men Love Church," *Orthodox Christianity*, October 20, 2010, <http://orthochristian.com/42390.html>, originally published in *The Word*, December 2007.

What recourse do the Orthodox have as racists and xenophobes seek and find validation of their worldview in the Church that claims to hold the fullness of truth? Orthodox Church officials continue to insist that "isolated cases" of prejudice are not connected to the fabric of the Orthodox mentality, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. All attempts to advance the discussion about revising liturgical texts remain in the realm of academic essays and blog posts, with no hierarchical support or even acknowledgment. In the meantime, narratives of Orthodox nationalism are flourishing in every national church and in every ethnic jurisdiction, alongside the accompanying narrative of contemporary culture wars. The language of a "feminist takeover," an "emasculatation of Western civilization", a "homosexualization of the culture," and the like is mainstream in contemporary Orthodox discourse.

Such rhetoric allows white extremists to claim their spiritual home in the Orthodox tradition, which they do with great conviction. It is not surprising to find supportive comments by travelers in white nationalist social media circles posted under such articles as "Gender Confusion and the Extinc-



tion of True Manhood," a blog post by Father Lawrence Farley, or under the many reposts of the essay "Why Orthodox Men Love Church," by Frederica Mathewes-Greene, in which she praises the "robust" masculinity of the Orthodox tradition, and cites such statements as "It's the last place in the world men aren't told they're evil simply for being men."¹⁰ Yet this conflation of the ideological narratives of "conservative" Orthodoxy, the alt-right, and the white nationalists does not appear to be cause for concern among many in the Orthodox clergy and hierarchy. On the contrary, most of our priests and bishops see no contradiction in condoning the proliferation of xenophobic views in the Church even as they denounce public embarrassments such as the antics of Matthew Heimbach. These denunciations ring hollow in the face of our corporate failing to address the root causes of the attraction that Orthodoxy holds for xenophobes. ✱



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