

Review of Gluschenko and Drygianakis, “On The Roads We Travelled”

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Olya Gluschenko and Costis Drygianakis, “On The Roads We Travelled”: *Unfrequented Places in the Metropolis of Demetrias*. Volos, Greece: Volos Academy Publications, 2022.

Folk art, forgotten churches. What relationship have such subjects with monarchy and Christian empire? Perhaps more than meets the eye. Olya Gluschenko and Costis Drygianakis, in their photo album “On the Roads We Travelled”: *Unfrequented Places in the Metropolis of Demetrias*, present an intimate view of sacred space as experienced in the earthly spaces where the eternal and the temporal meet. A project co-funded by Volos Academy for Theological Studies, the Region of Thessaly, and the Metropolis of Demetrias, these images explore the marriage of culture, religion, and state in the everyday lives and experiences of those living in the forsaken corners of a post-imperial world. In these charming and at times dilapidated spaces, history in its concrete reality encounters the metaphysical and abstract. In the context of the even lesser-known Metropolis of Demetrias, we are invited to explore the relationship of the everyday with the spiritual. We see not only the influence of religion on culture, but also that of culture on religion. In the authors’ words:

[All over Greece,] participation in religious practice does not necessarily indicate a deep or conscious faith, but more often than not gives

meaning to life through a sense of belonging. Rightly or wrongly from a theological point of view, Christianity in Greece is often understood in relation to family or local traditions, sometimes even to state conventions, and is manifested in close connection with these concepts. It does not therefore always approach metaphysical or doctrinal content or eschatological perspectives, and rarely does it have a character of rupture, as the Gospel commands; but rather it is engaged in a continuous dialogue with everyday life, shaping it and being shaped by it. (11)

It is interesting to consider this popular appropriation of the religious as the “other side of the coin” of empire and monarchy. A land inherits a vocabulary it doesn’t understand or consider in intellectual or abstract terms, the soil gradually imbibes this vocabulary, and a new creation—sometimes complementary to and other times in





contradiction with official doctrines or decrees—emerges. There is also an art that emerges from forgottenness itself, a creation born of abandon. In places human hands have not attended for some time, a perfect ray of sunlight makes its way through a hole in the wall, a living vine finds its way inside, and perhaps some small hidden creature has nestled into the bosom of Mary.

Gluschenko and Drygiankis offer some analysis in their introduction, but mostly to insist on the non-analytical nature of the project. They approach these places of public worship

and devotion with an anthropological gaze that is neither inside nor out (11–12). They wish to open to others the small beauties they’ve stumbled upon, and to share these precisely *without* a lesson in official theological vocabulary or cultural grammar. To encounter these scenes from the perspective of folk art, with a naive eye and a personal vocabulary, is to enter the reality of common encounters with religious art. And, in entering into the “naive,” we have the chance to live out the Gospel message, experiencing life “as the least of these.”

This photo album is, to my mind, a visual essay on religion in the hands of culture. Absent the wealth and influence of the greater centers of official Orthodox or Byzantine culture, what does a people whose faith, hope, and identity—inextricably bound to its religious culture—make with and from the remnants it has been given, the scraps left from the table of its great imperial past? While most of the pictures invoke the distanced gaze of the observer, or even the passer-by, there

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are also intimate portraits of clergy and parishioners, of community gathering for services and banquets—evidence of life and renewal.

A kind of game engages the viewer who peruses this album. In many if not most of the photos, there is the surprise of some incongruity or misplaced element that the eye might not catch immediately. As metropolitan of the region, His Eminence Ignatius of Demetrias and Almyros remarks with modesty, “The artist’s eye sees things that the bishop’s eye misses” (7). Browsing through this album, one appreciates not just the artist’s eye

in capturing these forgotten places, but also the hand of the grandmother, the village carpenter, and the amateur artist, for the humble gifts they have brought to their churches and communities over the years. One remarks on the chasm between the ideas of “pure” Byzantine aesthetics and the reality of its local expression, appreciating—if not at times even preferring—the

latter, and asking, as do Gluschenko and Drygiankis, “does this chaos of unplanned intrusions have its own magic?” (12).

This book is a perfect addition to any art lover’s collection. To the many wonderful art books featuring the



sanctioned and systematized religious art and architecture of the Orthodox world this album serves as a welcome counterpoint. These forgotten churches reveal how, inadvertently, new forms of artistic expression arise from the encounter of the sacred with the everyday. After a little immersion in the world of this album, you just might find your attention drawn to a half-attended corner of your own church or town, wonder who prayed there last and how, and perhaps even offer up a prayer of your own. ✱



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