Book Reviews

Orthodoxy on the Internet and the Internet in Orthodoxy

Review of: Mikhail Suslov. ed. 2016. *Digital Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet World: The Russian Orthodox Church and Web 2.0*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag. — 321 pp.

Translated by Markian Dobczansky

The book *Digital Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet World: The Russian Orthodox Church and Web 2.0* investigates the role, place, and meaning of Orthodoxy in the virtual and media-driven world. The book is made up of eleven chapters organized into three thematic sections: Discourses, Divergences, and Practices. The research builds on classic works by Heidi Campbell (2010, 2013), Knut Lundby (2012), Daniel Stout (2012), and Antonio Spadaro (2014), among others, which examine the intersection of religion and the Internet, the construction of sacred practices through the medium of the web, and the role of contemporary media in the evolution of religious consciousness.

The authors rightly point out that Western researchers have extensively studied Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Protestantism, and Catholicism in cyberspace, but Orthodoxy in the virtual world remains understudied. Russian academia has also produced only a few works on this topic; for this reason, this book should be of great interest to a broad audience and to leading specialists. In addition to the authors' research, the book features a "virtual round table" that showcases Orthodox bloggers' opinions on virtual reality.

The authors pay a great deal of attention to the ambivalent and complex reception of Orthodoxy on the part of Russia's in-

habitants. According to statistics, 70 percent of the population consider themselves Orthodox, while "only 2 to 4% of Russians keep the fast during the Lent, or take communion" (1). In the virtual sphere, Orthodoxy occupies a modest niche: the top site *pravoslavie.ru* only takes 101st place among the most popular sites on the Russian Internet. According to Mikhail Suslov, the collection's editor and one of its authors, Orthodoxy's reception is similar online and offline: "It is safe to say that the share of Orthodox content in Runet roughly corresponds to [. . .] the proportion of regular churchgoers in the Russian society" (6).

To what extent has the Russian Orthodox Church adapted to the steady virtualization of today's world? In the 1990s, digitization provoked a measure of unease within the Church. Admittedly, even today certain Orthodox believers relate to the Internet with alarm, calling it a "source of evil" and "the harbinger of the Anti-Christ." In the chapter "The Medium for Demonic Energies: 'Digital Anxiety' in the Russian Orthodox Church", Mikhail Suslov describes the position of clergy in relation to cyber-reality. To Hieromonk Anatolii Berestov, "virtual reality creates a 'false universe'" (32). Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev) has labeled the Internet as "the place where

people can freely lump together all of their dirt and negative attitudes without being censored or punished" (34–5). Church representatives call for transparency and renounce "masks" in the digital realm: the anonymity of blogs seems like "a token of irresponsibility and a lack of trust" (39).

At the same time, the majority of the clergy thinks that mastering the Internet is a requirement of the times. Orthodox bloggers note that digital technologies carry with them "great possibilities of both evil and good, and every person determines what is closer to him" (294). The Russian Orthodox Church uses the Internet to publish news about its own activities, publishes religious literature on its site, and distributes Orthodox journals and calendars. According to one author, Alexander Ponomariov, in the future online texts could replace "traditionally bulky print media," used in worship services (131).

In the words of Patriarch Kirill, the ROC does not "fight against the Internet, but for the Internet," and as Suslov notes, "the Orthodox religious tradition, conservative disposition of the ROC's leadership and constituency, as well as the Church's participation in shaping today's state political agenda is not particularly accommodating to the

new media, and yet its highest clerics and intellectuals understand that it is better to master the new technology than to fight it" (5). The clergy establishes rules for what is acceptable online, and in general do not welcome attendance or the carrying out of sacraments and rituals online. One person surveyed, Father Makarios (Markish), called "virtual chapels and candles" "a silly fake" (292). Father P. (another of the priests interviewed) said that the "traders" of sacred objects on the Internet "will be punished for their poison when their time comes" (292).

Two chapters of the book — "Holy Pixels: The Transformation of Eastern Orthodox Icons Through Digital Technology" (Sarah A. Riccardi-Swartz) and "Wi-Fi in Plato's Cave: The Digital Icon and the Phenomenology of Surveillance" (Fabian Heffermehl) — are dedicated to icons and Orthodox images in reality and virtual reality. Riccardi-Swartz analyzes the relationship of the Orthodox community of the city of Ozark (Missouri, USA) to digitalization and to the commercialization of icons on the Internet. Parishioners actively participate in Internet auctions (mostly on eBay) and easily obtain exclusive or important Orthodox images. Their actions in the market are similar to a game of chance:

one of the interviewees claimed he "won" an old icon of the Theotokos by bidding 30 dollars for it, and also obtained an icon of "the Mystical Supper of Christ" for a single dollar (269).

According to the position of church clergy, digital icons that exist only in electronic format (on computer screens, tablets, and phones) are no less sacred than those in wood, paper or plastic. Many encourage the faithful to pray through the "screen"; as Father Makarios (Markish) noted, "technological developments in recent years have brought computer images quite close to the original." According to one "virtual round table" participant, Father Sergii (Kruglov), there is no difference between an "icon [that] is painted or highlighted on the screen." Some clergymen emphasize that traditional icons are "preferable," but do not make any arguments against images on a screen (292–3).

Cyber leaders, such as Orthodox bloggers ("ortho-bloggers"), play a key role in the development of digital Orthodoxy. Ideologically they are divided into those who support the ROC and those who criticize its actions. According to research, the latter are more common on the web. In the chapter "Heretical Virtual Movement in Russian *LiveJournal* Blogs: Between Religion

and Politics," Ekaterina Grishaeva deals with the activities of the "heretic" blogger Vladimir Golyshev. Golyshev was "within" the system, a member of a parish for five years, but left after becoming disenchanted with the ROC (145). He began a personal blog, in which he expressed his religious worldview, which was largely based on his criticism of the existing church system.

The chapter "Between Homophobia and Gay Lobby: the Russian Orthodox Church and its Relationship to Homosexuality in Online Discussions" (Hanna Stähle) examines Protodeacon Andrei Kuraev's posts about the scandal at the Kazan seminary in 2014. Over the course of a few weeks, his page became enormously popular, as demonstrated not only by the number of subscribers and comments, but also from an analysis of Internet surveys on the subject. Kuraev's main point was his condemnation of the Church for its duplicity with regard to homophobia and its excessive secrecy around internal scandals.

Opposition bloggers also create Internet content that makes fun of the ROC's activities. In the chapter "Post-Secularity and Digital Anticlericalism on Runet," Maria Engström reviews the personal attitudes and creative activity of Internet users, which consists of jokes, Internet memes,

"demotivator" posters, and doctored images. Their evaluations of Church actions are often related to their criticisms of the existing power structure.

"Traditional" Orthodox bloggers respond to the challenge of these dissenters with jokes, counter-memes, and the creation of public groups (229–31). To counter the posts of Kuraev, supporters of Orthodoxy created the *LiveJournal* community "Kuraynik," in which they satirize and denounce the deacon's activities. They call him "homodeacon," "professional atheist," and "sectarian." In spite of this, according to Stähle, these blogs and groups are not particularly popular and have few subscribers: "'Kuraynik' suffers [from] its lack of readership and is trying to combat its own insignificance" (185).

The ROC considers it much more effective to create content to attract maximum attention from Internet users. Irina Kotkina and Mikhail Suslov describe "traditional" Orthodox bloggers on the platform *LiveJournal*. These are usually young people around the age of thirty, who "graduated from an institution of higher Orthodox education in Moscow or St Petersburg [. . .] and received a position of a priest in a parish, usually in the province" (285). They share many of the same views

and "constitute a net of interconnected 'friendships', and established traditions of commenting on each other's posts" (285). Orthodox bloggers not only maintain accounts for themselves, but also in response to orders "from above": Dmitrii Vaisburd reported that he created his account with the "blessing" of his spiritual father, and Father Makarios (Markish) disclosed that he began his life on the Internet after "the direct call from the [Church] hierarchy" (289). According to the authors, the ROC actively encourages the creation of personal blogs, which influence their audience and often have no fewer than "two or three thousand readers" (286–87).

If for "traditional" bloggers, the Internet is a place of missionary work and calling their flock to the faith, then for oppositional bloggers it is practically the only outlet they have for expressing their views. For Golyshev, the Internet allows him to create his own "outcast religious identity" (157), which would have had little impact (or been legal) in an offline context. Creating blogs for both groups allows them to find fulfillment, which, incidentally, also increases the dynamism of Orthodoxy on the web.

For ordinary Orthodox Christians, the Internet is primarily a source of information about religious traditions and sacred rituals. Parishioners read blogs and ask questions in forums and on social media. As Suslov observes, "people often do not know how to behave themselves in church, or how to approach a priest and ask him a question. Blogs of the priests effectively solve this problem, providing them with a medium in which they feel more 'at home' and do not hesitate to speak about their religious needs" (24). On the other hand, the Internet offers the possibility for lively interaction among Orthodox believers. In the chapter "Ortho-Media for Ortho-Women: In Search of Patterns of Piety," Anastasia Mitrofanova shares examples of interactions among parishioners in forums. In the discussion "Are you eating Lenten mayonnaise during the fast and Lent, is it appropriate?" there are multiple points of view, from the sharply unfavorable — "Formally may be yes, but in such case I don't fully understand the meaning of the fast" — to the rather positive: "We ate mayonnaise during the fast for ages [. . .] As for harm, life is harmful in general" (246–47).

According to Mitrofanova, virtual interaction is particularly effective for female parishioners. In the Russian Orthodox tradition, it is not customary to have special meetings during which women's

questions can be discussed.[1] For this reason, female parishioners prefer communicating on specialized "women's" sites. The most common topics in these conversations are "Culinary and Lenten food," "Clothing, inside and outside the church," and "Relations with men (including sex)" (244). Addressing certain questions directly to priests can cause women to feel inhibited or uncomfortable: "I am very interested in this issue, what is allowed and what is not allowed on 'these' days. I am ashamed to ask the father at the church. Matushki, enlighten me, please" (245). According to the research, online interactions are "a supplement to, not a substitute for, the normal liturgical life of the practicing Christians. They constitute no 'digital church' or 'network parishes,'" but women often "prefer on-line to off-life [sic] non-liturgical contacts to work out patterns of Orthodox piety" (256).

For those who think about the church or God, the Internet is a place where they can express their ideas and sentiments. In the chapter "The Religious Identity of Russian Internet Users: Attitudes Towards God and Russian Orthodox Church", Viktor Khroul

examines the site *lovehate.ru*,[2] where people exchange ideas about their "love" and "hatred" toward God. According to the author, a majority of those surveyed expressed "love" (1,039 respondents), while 676 respondents wrote of their "hatred." In order to explain their feelings, "internet users mostly refer to their own experience (59.5%) and the experience of other people (16.4%), not [to] faith (10.6%), authority (6.1%) or tradition (3.1%)" (303–5).

Researchers of the virtual world increasingly confront the necessity of reacting in real time to contemporary challenges and the dynamic changes taking place in the virtual space. Dramatic transformations are happening even in a seemingly traditional and slow-to-embrace-change institution like the ROC. For example, today communication over *LiveJournal* (about which much was written in the book) is already being replaced by interactions on other social media sites. In my own observations of the activities of priests in the Magnitogorsk eparchy, this communication happens mostly on *Vkontakte* and *Instagram*. The latter is preferred, as it generates quick reactions from follow-

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1. According to Riccardi-Swartz, American parishes often have a special "coffee hour" after services, during which parishioners can discuss various "women's" questions (262).

2. This site has been closed down since November 2019 due to complaints about extremism and legal violations.

ers. In many eparchies, special departments that create content have existed for many years. Today in the period of coronavirus-related isolation, the Orthodox Church confronts new challenges and shapes its online image in new ways. Discussions about the "disinfection of shrines" as well as the necessity of special liturgies and prayers against coronavirus all take place exclusively online. There is a sense that the Church today exists no less in the virtual world than it does in the real one; like the social sciences, the Church is searching for new ways to adapt to the breakneck pace of change and the rapid shifts between online and offline status.

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Persistent Orientalism: How Does the West View Islam on the Internet?

Review of: Gary R. Bunt. 2018 *Hashtag Islam. How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. — 234 pp.

Professor Gary Bunt was one of the first to draw attention to the phenomenon of cyber-Islam. As they would say in social media sites, he examined this topic "before it became mainstream." By mainstream, I am referring to the influx of works that rec-