

The Eastern Orthodox Church. A new history. By John Anthony McGuckin. Pp. viii + 352. New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2020. £25. 978 0 300 21876 3
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One-volume histories of the Eastern Orthodox Church in English are very few. Alexander Schmemmann's *The historical road of Eastern Orthodoxy* was published in English in 1963 (translated from Russian), an expression of Schmemmann's early interest in church history before turning seriously to liturgical theology; that volume, though still in print and still interesting for the arguments it makes, has long been out of date. Timothy Ware's classic, *The Orthodox Church*, published the same year, was only half devoted to history, with the second half of the book presenting Orthodox beliefs and practices. More recently is the first volume of Hilarion Alfeyev's multi-volume *Orthodox Christianity*, entitled *The history and canonical structure of the Orthodox Church* (2015), also translated from the Russian, which is informative if not compelling. Perhaps naturally, given that Alfeyev is a leading Russian theologian and bishop, half of that volume is focused on Russia. McGuckin's book, therefore, is the first volume written in English for an English-speaking audience.

If the first generation of leading Orthodox voices in the English-speaking world were Russian *émigrés* (Schmemmann, Georges Florovsky, John Meyendorff), the next generation have been especially British converts to Orthodoxy: first Kallistos (Timothy) Ware and, more recently, Andrew Louth and John Anthony McGuckin. McGuckin is a priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church who retired as the Nielsen Professor of Early Church History at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Byzantine Christian Studies at Columbia University, and has since returned to the UK. This book is a culmination of decades of research and teaching, drawing from his own prolific works in patristics and historical theology, including his eloquently written *The Orthodox Church: an introduction to its history, theology, and spiritual culture* (Hoboken, NJ 2008). The current volume is very much a complement to that one, which systematically presented Orthodox doctrine and spirituality.

McGuckin approaches the Church's history as an Orthodox theologian and, as he states in the beginning, 'the Orthodox insist that church history is quintessentially a theological reading of historical events' (p. 20). The book therefore does not aim to present an objective or neutral account, but most decidedly a confessional one. That said, McGuckin takes a very broad and generous view of Christian history, especially the unified Church of the first millennium. While he does dismantle Western caricatures of Eastern Christianity (such as 'caesaro-papism'), he presents the Orthodox view without polemicising against Western Christianity.

McGuckin's narrative starts from the beginning – that is, from Jesus of Nazareth. While not dismissing the contributions of critical biblical scholarship, he is clearly critical of the 'quest for the historical Jesus'. He states directly that 'For Orthodoxy, there is no great chasm to be found between the teachings of Jesus and the manner in which his first disciples, the apostles, and the evangelists passed on those teachings' (p. 26). From there he proceeds to present a concise, fresh and cohesive account of the life and teachings of Jesus, followed by the foundation of the Church and its early preaching, also critiquing the notion that the Early Church was not characterised by a uniform belief. The Gnostic Gospels were not

suppressed by power-hungry bishops (who, McGuckin points out, had no coercive power in the second and third centuries), but were set aside in a natural process because they did not conform to the Church's teachings. McGuckin presents a sophisticated challenge to what have become standard scholarly narratives in New Testament and Early Church studies.

The chapters covering the first millennium are more a history of theology than a comprehensive history that includes institutions, practices or popular religiosity. It reads as a distillation of McGuckin's research, including his magisterial earlier work (which received surprisingly few reviews), *The path of Christianity: the first thousand years* (Westmont, IL 2017). McGuckin is able to convey in remarkably compact fashion Christianity's most complex doctrines of the Trinity and Christology in ways that are not just clear, but render comprehensible to the modern reader why these doctrines were considered the core of Christian belief in the early centuries (and continue to be for the Orthodox). He also explains the Orthodox perspective on issues such as the relationship of Church and State and the understanding of church authority, both of which developed along quite different lines than in the West (and continue to be sources of misunderstanding). The first half of the book, then, draws from McGuckin's strengths and presents key arguments in a sophisticated and lucid fashion.

The second half of the book deals with Orthodoxy in the Slavic world as well as the Greek Church after the fall of Constantinople. Here, naturally, McGuckin is drawing primarily on secondary literature. It is almost impossible for one person to provide a good history of Orthodoxy since 1453 because the research is still very specialised and in a dizzying array of languages (Greek, Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian, Arabic etc.). There are not even good general national histories of any of those Churches available in any Western language for the would-be historian to draw upon. McGuckin handles the task as admirably as could be, balancing the narrative between the major stories (Russian and Greek) with the other Slavic and Romanian Churches. Not all of the details of the Russian Church in the Soviet period are entirely accurate, though he gets the overall picture right. The book is strongest in discussing spirituality, such as the movement that produced the *Philokalia* and the hesychast revival that ensued, together with the chapter on the Orthodox diaspora in North America and Western Europe. The book ends with chapters on recent 'outstanding' Orthodox figures, an explanation of what a would-be visitor should expect to see on attending an Orthodox service, reflections on the role of Orthodoxy in the post-modern world, and a commentary on the Nicene Creed in an appendix. Unfortunately, the footnotes and bibliography do not direct the reader to the next step if she wants to know more about a given subject.

Although the Orthodox Church is one of the three historic Christian confessions, it is still frequently neglected in surveys of the history of Christianity (whether textbooks or courses), in part because of the lack of accessible literature for the non-specialist. For that reason alone, this book is highly significant, and it should be read by everyone who studies any field of the history of Christianity.

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