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Review

Mikhail Suslov (ed.)

***Digital Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet World:
The Russian Orthodox Church and Web 2.0***

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Reviewer: Katerina Linden, Stockholm University, Sweden

The edited collection of essays that forms the book *Digital Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet World* investigates the current condition of Orthodoxy in modern Russia in light of ongoing online media development. It demonstrates how the digital technologies have been utilised and criticised by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and how the Internet, in its own turn, has embraced religious practices. Users can now visit a chapel and light a candle online, send an email with a prayer request, visit a special forum for female believers, or create an antireligious demotivator image. The Russian case merits special attention due to its unique character: in contrast to some religious institutions in Western cultures, in Russia the Orthodox Church makes an attempt to build its image as a leading opinion maker and the soul of the nation, and has very strong connections with political powers. This book pays attention to these tendencies, and inspects the ways in which the ROC is trying to use the Internet as a tool for its further cultural dominance.

The multidisciplinary approach of this volume includes anthropology, politics, theology, historiosophy and philosophy, which allows the book to explore not only the relationship between people and religion online, but the power structures in the Russian society. Through the analysis of various digital media materials, it indicates the presence of both the state control and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)'s involvement in the management of the Russian Internet. As explained in the introduction, it seems that the results of the ROC's activities online are mixed: church leaders are skeptical about new

media that break the traditions and values of Russian “spiritual sovereignty” (p.7), but try to adapt to this foreign invasion (p.8). Considering the hypotheses that in Russia “Orthodox religion serves as a synonym for Russian national self-identification”, and that the “ROC is a ‘state-shaping’ religion with an ineliminable political and geopolitical component” (p.2), the authors of *Digital Orthodoxy* have managed to create a portrait of a modern generation of Russians, with mobile phones in hands, chatting about God, demons, prayer and church at every place where they find Wi-Fi.

Digital Orthodoxy consists of eleven chapters divided into three thematically oriented sections that focus on different aspects of the interrelation between religion and society in the new media environment. The first part, “Discourses”, chronicles the ROC’s activities on the Internet. The second part, “Divergences”, explains how new media technologies promote social resistance against religious (and political) narratives. The third part, “Practices”, concludes the essays in a cohesive way, showing how digital media engage with religious practices and allow believers and church activists to express themselves in a new, online world.

According to the editor of the volume, Mikhail Suslov, whose essay starts the part titled “Discourses”, ROC activists are experiencing “moral panic” online, and developing a “digital anxiety” (Chapter 1). Religious leaders quoted by Suslov claim that the Internet is overwhelming for a young mind, and, most importantly, it is “threatening for Orthodox intellectuals, because it aligns digital technologies with the danger of losing Russia’s national and cultural identity” (p.28). Priests give Internet such characteristics as “fake”, “shadowy”, “addictive”, “sinful”, even “demonic” (p.43), in this way demonstrating their resentment towards a new source of information that cannot be moderated by the ROC. Magda Dolińska-Rydzek continues to discuss demonic metaphors embraced by the ROC, taking an example of discussions about Antichrist started by Russian religious leaders in connection with global digitalization (Chapter 2). Fabian Heffermehl explains the negative attitude of the church leaders to the Internet by the concept of the icon-medium: the icon “creates an interaction between the observer and the depicted saints” (Chapter 3, p.103), and the Internet creates a similar interaction, but often with much more dark characters. He develops his parallel between a digital medium and icon theology in an interesting way, pointing out its resemblance with a false icon or an idol through juxtaposing God-given reality to virtual reality, and God’s creature to Darth Vader (p.107). Alexander Ponomariov concludes the exploration of the ROC’s activities online through an analysis of digital ecclesiology (Chapter 4). He explores how the Internet is successfully used by religious organisations for both external and internal purposes, as the internal network that helps religious workers to communicate with each other, and the medium there they can interact with the public.

Ekaterina Grishaeva starts the part titled “Divergences” with an essay about religious blogs. She shows that the bloggers’ narratives are highly politicized (Chapter 5). Following this thought, Hanna Stähle problematizes the relationship between the ROC and homosexuality in light of the recent political regulations in Russia, and presents the gay church lobby concept, which implies that the stigmatization of the LGBT community by the ROC goes in line with the protection of homosexual religious workers (Chapter 6). She uses qualitative and quantitative methodology to highlight communication patterns around the gay

lobby controversy and the queer topic in Russia, concluding that both these themes are successfully tabooed online: users simply do not want to discuss and analyze these issues. In contrast, Maria Engström explores the idea of “digital anti-clericalism” through the detailed interpretation of digital forms of political folklore (various memes) and demonstrates the resistance against the political and religious initiatives that is strongly present in online communication in Russia.

Anastasia Mitrofanova opens the part titled “Practices” with a case study of female religious forums, where women discuss cooking, clothing and relationships in light of Orthodox culture, trying to find examples to follow that are not produced in a Western world (Chapter 8). Talks about fashion choices tend to develop into theological discussions, but in general all forums demonstrate a lack of knowledge about religious traditions: female believers tend to guess and assume how they should perform their daily routine in the Orthodox way, but do not reference any sources. Another digital tool, a business around Eastern Orthodox icons that are available for purchase online in North America, is explored by Sarah A. Riccardi-Swartz (Chapter 9). She argues that icons are popular due to the shopping platform’s promotion of the miraculous mythology that surrounds them. Returning to the topic of “ortho-bloggers”, Irina Kotkina and Mikhail Suslov summarize a line-up of interviews with religious activists who discuss the challenges and opportunities that ROC faces online (Chapter 10). In the final essay of the book Viktor Khroul explores the users’ attitude towards God and church through the content analysis of the lovehate.ru website (Chapter 11). His results show that Russian Internet users base their religious identity on their personal and family experience and not on media or state directives. This conclusion once more confirms the ambiguity of the ROC’s positioning that is associated more with official than personal significance.

“Digital Orthodoxy in the Post-Soviet World” will be interesting for professors, graduate students, and advanced undergraduate students of Russian studies, theology, communication and media studies, as well as scholars and students in cultural studies, history, and sociology, and anyone who wants to get an insight into the Orthodox religiosity online. This book demonstrates different approaches to methodology and theory: some essays are more descriptive, while others are more analytical. Qualitative methods used in the majority of the papers provide fodder for further research: for instance, this volume does not go beyond the ROC’s discourse, and does not provide insight into how the ROC relates to other religions in Russia and abroad. Still, as a first academic book about digital religion in Russia, it contributes immensely to the study of religion and digital technologies, and brings a valuable diversity to the study of media, religion, and culture.