CHAPTER TWO

IGNORING THE EAST: CORRECTING A SERIOUS FLAW IN WORLD CHRISTIANITY SCHOLARSHIP

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Introduction

As academicians discuss the dynamic changes in world Christianity today—particularly the concepts of ‘reverse missions’ and Christianity’s geographical shift from North to South—they run the risk of ignoring Eastern forms of the faith.1 Only about 10 percent of the world's Christians are from the Orthodox families, and, according to fertility trends, this percentage will continue to decline. However, Orthodox Christianity is ancient and has survived against the odds. Orthodox Christians see themselves as having preserved a precious treasure by maintaining their teachings and traditions.

While Orthodoxy is relatively small on a global scale, in Eastern Europe it is by far the most common form of Christianity. Nearly one out of three Christians in the Middle East is Orthodox. About one out of ten Christians in Africa is Orthodox. Considering that all three of these contexts are politically significant for the West, one would think the Western curriculum would be designed better to understand these ancient forms of Christian faith. Ignoring the East not only perpetuates a Western bias against Orthodoxy but also impoverishes Western Christians, many of whom are unable to properly understand Orthodox history and theology.

This chapter begins by building the case that Eastern and Orthodox Christianities have been neglected by Christian scholars in the past. The second section explores how traditional Christian cartography has been challenged in recent years. The third section discusses scholars who are applying increasing pressure on historians of Christianity to be mindful of

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the East as the ‘North to South’ thesis grows in influence. The fourth section provides resources for exploring Eastern and Orthodox Christianities, focusing on a recent research trip to Armenia taken by the author.

Ignoring the East . . . Again

Maria Puente, in “Get an Earful of Offbeat Podcasts,” an article in USA Today, highlights esoteric podcasts that have found considerable audiences. One is by Lars Brownworth, a well-traveled former prep school teacher who has recorded a series of lectures on the Byzantine Empire. In 12 Byzantine Rulers he discusses Diocletian to Constantine XI with a contagious passion.2 Puente expresses surprise that something so arcane could demand a million downloads, “for a topic that barely rates mention in many university history departments.”3

Puente touches on something painfully obvious: most Western historians of Christianity are not trained in Eastern forms of the faith. Byzantine, North African, Central Asian, Russian, and Middle Eastern Christianity are barely noticed in the Western Academy, in spite of Eastern Christianity’s achievement of surviving against stupefying odds in places such as Iraq and Russia. How have Coptic and Lebanese churches managed to exist despite many waves of jihad? Why is Russian Orthodoxy undergoing a revival after seven decades of persecution and mass murder; it is perhaps the most orchestrated, meticulous suppression of Christianity in the entire history of the faith? Why are the Turkish genocides against the Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Christians during the First World War only recently receiving widespread attention within the guild of church historians? This orchestrated series of ethnic cleansings claimed around three million lives. This shocking neglect of the historical record is a travesty. All the more indicting is that Turkey, long a heartland of Christianity, has almost entirely purged itself of Christians. Today, it is 99.8 percent Muslim.4

The persecution of Christians in the East continues. In June 2010 a Catholic bishop serving in Turkey was stabbed to death and then beheaded in the streets while his murderer proclaimed that he had killed “the great

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2 See http://www.anders.com/lectures/lars_brownworth/12_byzantine_rulers/.
4 See CIA World Factbook’s entry on Turkey, located at: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html.