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Eastern Christianity and Western Social Theory



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Preface

Orthodox Christianity, both generally and in its numerous local manifestations, has never been a central topic of scholarly interest in Western social theory. The great social thinkers have either ignored it completely or dealt with it only marginally, usually as a case of essential deviation from Western Christianity. By contrast, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism have been examined much more systematically in this regard – consider, for example, the studies pertaining to the rise of Western modernity and its alleged religious, Western Christian roots. Regardless of these tendencies, pioneering social thinker Max Weber, for example, admittedly intended to expand his focus into an examination of Eastern Christianity (mostly in its Russian Orthodox version) in the context of his comparative studies on the economic ethics of world religions. His untimely death prevented him from doing so, however. More recently, after the collapse of Communism in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, there has been, among other things, a stronger scholarly interest in Eastern Orthodoxy – the predominant form of Christianity in such countries, with a long historical background. During the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s Serbian Orthodoxy was thus very often taken into account and contrasted with Croatian Catholicism and Bosnian Islam.

Yet, in most of these studies, usual stereotypes about Orthodox Christianity abounded. It was thus considered to be a parochial, archaic religious tradition, prone to irrationalism, nationalism and violence, while its potential for development, modernisation and democratisation was seriously doubted. A classical example is Samuel Huntington's notorious post Cold War geopolitical theory about the "clash of civilisations" that monopolised both the mass media and scholarly discourse in the 1990s. Orthodox Christianity, like any other religion, undoubtedly has its own characteristics and idiosyncrasies, which are understandable in the light of its particular socio-historical development. It is nonetheless extremely dubious to try to construct general theories about the alleged non-modern or non-progressive "essential character" of Orthodox Christianity. The danger of falling into widespread "Orientalist" or "Balkanist" ideological traps and of distorting one's perspective with Western bias remains imminent. A more systematic treatment of Orthodox Christianity from a social scientific perspective is still badly needed, yet this treatment should not have an ideological basis, sacrificing scholarly integrity and repeating traditional old-fashioned prejudices.

The tenth issue of the *Erfurter Vorträge zur Kulturgeschichte des Orthodoxen Christentums* provides a valuable overview of how Eastern Christianity

came to be examined within the framework of Western social theory. It contains the contribution of Professor Chris Hann, founding director of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. As a social anthropologist, Hann, together with various research teams, has turned his attention to the transition period after the end of socialism in several countries in which Eastern Christianity (including the Greek Catholics) has historically had a strong foothold. As a result, he became sensitive to the numerous locally determined concretisations and manifestations of this rich religious tradition, as well as to their significance for theoretical reflection on religion in general. In this examination, he basically calls into question essentialist views, which make all-encompassing theories out of limited data and circumstantial evidence. In this way, he exposes many of the fundamental biases characterising Western theorisation with regard to Eastern Christianity. Drawing on ethnographic and social anthropological research regarding the various “Eastern Christianities”, he shows the complexity of the issues involved and argues on the one hand for the overcoming of parochialism in Western social theory and on the other hand for more interdisciplinary, comparative approaches to both Eastern and Western Christianity.

This text goes back to a lecture given at the Max-Weber-Kolleg of the University of Erfurt on 29 November 2010. At my request, Chris Hann agreed to publish his lecture in the present series, and I thank him for this. My thanks also go to my secretary, Annett Psurek, as well as to Astrid Willenbacher and David Doss, who helped with the preparation of this publication.

Erfurt, December 2011

Vasilios N. Makrides

Eastern Christianity and Western Social Theory

Chris Hann

Prologue: Multiple Anthropologies

Over the last five years, to be more precise ever since Hermann Goltz and I convened a conference in September 2005 on “Eastern Christianities in Anthropological Perspective”, I have come to understand that there exist very different kinds of anthropology, which it is important to bring together.¹ I am not referring to the various national traditions within socio-cultural anthropology (itself a composite of British *social* anthropology and North American *cultural* anthropology), nor to the field of physical (or biological) anthropology, which has developed under various names alongside the socio-cultural since the nineteenth century. Obviously “the study of man” has come to mean very different things in different branches of scholarship, from the “hard” experimental sciences to the “soft” speculations of the humanities. I focus in this lecture on the relationship between the British social science in which I was trained and the German discourses of *Anthropologie* which, since the pioneering contributions of Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottfried Herder in the era of the Enlightenment, have been prominent in both philosophy and systematic theology. I want to show that even these very different types of anthropologist can learn from each other, and that at least some aspects of their enquiries might converge. At any rate, this British social anthropologist has gained a great deal from his cooperation with the theologian and church historian Hermann Goltz.

¹ The conference was held at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle and the proceedings were published recently (Hann and Goltz 2010). This paper is an expanded English version of a lecture given in German at the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt on 29 November 2010. The German text was published as Hann (2011) in a memorial volume for my Halle colleague Hermann Goltz, who died shortly afterwards. Much of what I know about Eastern Christianity I owe to him. I have eliminated some personal and local references from this version, and regret that I can no longer benefit from Hermann’s advice and comments on the new, (social) anthropological materials added in their place.

The division of labour between social anthropology and theology was famously defined by Edward Evans-Pritchard at the end of his monograph *Nuer Religion* (Evans-Pritchard 1956). This Oxford anthropologist, who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1944, when his fieldwork among the Nuer was long completed, exemplified the profile of the discipline as it developed in the era of the European colonial empires. He worked in Africa, mainly among peoples with simple technology and no knowledge of writing, i.e. *Naturvölker*. Before writing his book about the religion of the Nuer, a cattle-keeping people of the Nilotic Sudan, Evans-Pritchard had already published detailed accounts of their social institutions in fields such as economy, politics and kinship. Religion posed a greater challenge, since the local concepts were hard to grasp for the foreign scholar. His main example was the Nuer concept of *kwoth*, which he translated as “Spirit” but also as “God”, thus implying a form of monotheism, albeit quite unlike that of Christianity. At the end of his study, Evans-Pritchard concluded as follows:

Though prayer and sacrifice are exterior actions, Nuer religion is ultimately an interior state. This state is externalized in rites which we can observe, but their meaning depends finally on an awareness of God and that men are dependent on him and must be resigned to his will. At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist.²

Earlier in his career Evans-Pritchard had cooperated closely with Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, who viewed social anthropology as a “comparative sociology”, the ultimate goal of which was to provide a “natural science of society” (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). This was a continuation of the positivism of the nineteenth century, when the social sciences were founded. They were able to consolidate themselves thanks to the remarkable expansion of the universities in the twentieth century. Social anthropology has remained a small subject, competing for resources with sociology and other disciplines. It has survived the end of the European colonial empires. But it has fallen far short of fulfilling the ambitious goals of Radcliffe-Brown. Many socio-cultural anthropologists nowadays understand their discipline as closer to the humanities than to the natural sciences. They emphasize the challenge of understanding “other cultures”, including their religious ideas. At least towards the end of his life, Evans-Pritchard was more

²

Evans-Pritchard 1956: 322. His views were influential but by no means uncontested. Godfrey Lienhardt, a close colleague in Oxford, put forward an account of the religion of the Dinka, neighbours of the Nuer, which implied a substantially deeper gulf to the world religions of Eurasia (Lienhardt 1961). Meyer Fortes, a specialist in West Africa, took a very different view of the relationship to theology (see Schnepel 1990).

interested in connecting Nuer concepts of the divine to experiences of the mystical and the spiritual in the world religions than he was in, say, approaching religion with the quantitative cross-cultural methods of a sociologist of religion steeped in rational choice theories. And yet the social anthropologist is more likely to have such a sociologist as a Faculty colleague than a theologian. Theology, formerly located alongside philosophy at the very centre of the Western university, has been marginalized by the impact of secularization. This phenomenon is not specific to those institutions that were subject to Marxist-Leninist ideology for four decades or more, such as the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg. It is a general, post-Enlightenment pattern, contemporaneous with the coining of *Anthropologie*.

It seems to me that this separation has been highly detrimental. Thanks above all to the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics, social anthropology in Britain found its niche by specializing in the close-up ethnographic investigation of localized communities, with scant regard if any for their history and their position in contemporary global networks. Evans-Pritchard did not get along at all with Malinowski, but he followed the new paradigm and proved to be an excellent ethnographer in the British Sudan. So long as social anthropology was largely confined to the *Naturvolk* slot, scholars were free to draw the boundary to theology wherever they wished. Since Oxford University has never had an Institute for Nuer Theology, Evans-Pritchard could trespass as he pleased; there was no need for him to stop where he did.

But eventually anthropologists began to study *Kulturvölker*, to engage with the world religions of Eurasia which today have become truly global. These religions do have their own traditions of theology, some of which at least have paid attention to the theologies of rival faiths, but usually from perspectives differing radically from those of the positivist social scientist. The tensions become most acute when anthropologists come all the way home: it is one thing to study Hinduism in South Asia or Islam in North Africa, but quite another to study Catholics in France or Poland, or Protestants in England or Denmark. The intellectual challenges faced by the “anthropology of Christianity” have been partly deferred by a continuing tendency to focus on converts elsewhere, in places such as Melanesia or Africa, rather than to investigate Christians “at home”. Nonetheless scholars such as Talal Asad and Fenella Cannell have for some time been drawing attention to rather fundamental problems, including the problem of how to define religion in the first place. Should the category be restricted, e.g. to “Abrahamic” notions of a transcendent God, who clearly differs radically from

the “immanent” spirits which populate the cosmologies of most of humanity? It has become almost commonplace in recent socio-cultural anthropology to argue that to approach cosmologies in terms of an internal state of belief is an ethnocentric distortion – the consequence of falsely generalizing a notion peculiar to Christianity. From this perspective, we should recognize the enduring “Christianity of anthropology” and be continuously alert to the bias of the dominant European intellectual traditions (Asad 1993, Cannell 2005; cf. Hann 2007).

Perhaps this criticism would be better formulated as the “Protestantism of anthropology”, since the liturgical traditions of the other branches of Christianity do not place the same one-sided emphasis on texts and interiorized belief. This line of argument gives rise to the opposite danger: that of denying or underestimating the significance of “internal” notions of belief in all the non-Protestant traditions, by presenting them narrowly in terms of their ritualized practices. The basic challenge remains: how to understand the religions (or cosmologies, or simply world views) of other peoples, without distorting them through our own dominant conceptual prisms. This is clearly a formidable problem for a social science that needs to be sure that the ideas and behaviour it wishes to analyse are sufficiently commensurable for comparisons to make sense.

By the time he wrote *Nuer Religion*, Evans-Pritchard had rejected both Radcliffe-Brown’s comparative, scientific model and the synchronicism of Malinowski in favour of history and hermeneutics. He specified the point at which he was ready to hand over to the theologian. But how is this rhetorical move to be made in the case of religions which have their own literate intellectual high cultures, established long before the upstart social sciences? Hermann Goltz helped me to understand that rich concepts in the theology of Eastern Christianity such as *paradoxon* can hardly be translated with a modern English term that derives from the same Greek original (not to mention the key concept of *paradosis*, inadequately rendered with the Latin-derived *tradition*). He explained to me that the very concept of *theologia* itself does not have quite the same meaning in the East, where it is “not a scholarly discourse *on* God; it is rather a liturgical discourse *of* and *between* God and human beings” (Hann and Goltz 2010: 14). If this is so, what then are the prospects for comparison?

In this lecture I shall not attempt to resolve these foundational conundrums of my discipline. My aim is both wider and narrower. It is wider in the sense that I am concerned with the Western bias of the modern social sciences in general, not just social anthropology, though I shall take most of my examples from the

discipline I know best. It is narrower in the sense that I have a particular focus, neither “at home” in the West nor classically “other”. I argue that the case of Eastern Christianity is uniquely instructive for exposing the fundamental bias that continues in Western theorizing. I concentrate on the work of Max Weber, because this has been of such enormous influence in Western social science. I shall then note recent attempts to modify and extend Weber’s insights with respect to Catholicism. Protestantism and Catholicism are the largest Christian commodities worldwide. It is therefore not surprising that they have dominated social science studies of Christianity. Large Eastern Christian communities have been neglected, partly because those in the socialist bloc were long inaccessible. They complicate the dichotomous models. I shall review some recent socio-cultural anthropological studies of Eastern Orthodox traditions with these larger issues in mind. Some of this work gives the impression that “Orthopraxy” might be a more apt term than Orthodoxy, but I shall suggest that the salience of ritual and practice is better seen as the combined artefact of our ethnographic methods and theoretical dilemmas. I go on to ask whether there is a distinct Orthodox culture or civilization, based on values allegedly differing from those of the liberal West. The integration of Eastern Christians into comparative historical analysis is shown to be one necessary step, a particularly sensitive one, in an expansive framework that must ultimately embrace not only the closely-related Abrahamic faiths but also other world religions as they formed in the Axial Age. When this is accomplished, historically minded social anthropologists will certainly want to take an interest in changing *ideas* (including the emergence of our concept of belief); they will need to work closely with theologians in their elucidation. But when it comes to mapping ideas on to *Realgeschichte* and explanations of an alleged “breakthrough to modernity”, I argue that theology is unlikely to hold the key. I think that Hermann Goltz, church historian as well as theologian, and certainly unsympathetic to the historical materialist ideology of the GDR, the state of which he was a citizen for most of his life, would have agreed.

The Protestant Bias

According to many historians and the mainstream social sciences, as they emerged in Europe and are taught nowadays in most parts of the world, the world experienced a radical transition from “tradition” to “modernity” some

time between the sixteenth century and the consolidation of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. Most theories along these lines attach great importance to the Protestant Reformation. This is not unrelated to the fact that a Protestant island and its North-American offshoot were the world's dominant powers in the era in which this knowledge took shape; but the phenomenon is by no means restricted to the Anglo-Saxon literature and the most influential scholarly inputs have been those of a patriotic German liberal called Max Weber.

Weber was by no means the first to suggest connections between commercial prosperity and the nature of the religious community and its doctrines, notably *innerweltliche Askese*. Others had already made similar observations for the colonies and post-colonies of the United States. In his famous essay *The Protestant Ethic, and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05), Weber drew on the writings of Benjamin Franklin and was careful not to advance a strong causal theory. Instead he put forward a subtle argument asserting an elective affinity (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) between Calvinist convictions and the dynamic entrepreneurialism that was christened by Weber and his historian contemporary Werner Sombart *capitalism*. The links were so subtle that the alleged affinity could not be confirmed at all in later empirical efforts to link the spread of Protestant ideas with the breakthrough to a modern capitalist economy (Marshall 1982). Weber probably misread Franklin, and economic historians of the United States have questioned whether puritan asceticism played any positive role at all in that country's development. Countless scholars have pointed out the precedents for "capitalist" economic behaviour in numerous parts of Eurasia from ancient Mesopotamia onwards. Weber himself drew attention in later writings to essentially the same religious tension in ancient Judaism. Despite this mountain of critical scholarship, however, Weber's essay of 1904–5 entered the sociological canon.

The influence of this model is by no means restricted to sociology and social theory but has penetrated the teaching of history in many parts of the world. Weber's archetypal Protestant is taken to be the ideal of a "modern" citizen, who has no need of priests, sacraments and material encumbrances of any sort to communicate with the deity. The Reformation is taken to be a caesura, opening new rifts between secular and ecclesiastical authorities, paving the way for the Enlightenment, and ultimately for the more thoroughgoing rational humanism which culminated in the nineteenth century in the work of Charles Darwin and in the birth of the social sciences. Weber himself spoke of long-term processes of "rationalization".

He expressed his profoundly melancholic evaluation of the rise of bureaucracy and rational-legal domination with the metaphor of “disenchantment”.³ Yet simultaneously he had no doubt that this was the direction of progress.

For Max Weber, then, Protestantism was the key to the genesis of modernity, secularity, individualism and European exceptionalism. When he wrote about *das Abendland*, it was primarily the Protestant north which he had in mind.⁴ This “great divide” theory and models such as “the West versus the rest” continue to enjoy remarkable credibility both inside and outside academia. Weber is not always cited nowadays, and certainly he is unlikely to figure prominently in fields such as postcolonial studies; but behind the new vocabulary (“agency”, “subjectification” etc.) the influence of *The Protestant Ethic* still makes itself felt. Thus the focus of the well-received work of US cultural anthropologist Webb Keane is not the economic breakthrough to capitalism but what he terms the representational economy of language and a broader “semiotic ideology” (Keane 2007). For Keane, modernity is a subjective feeling in the individual and its emancipatory narrative is one of self-transformation. Purification and moral sincerity are achieved through the dematerialization of potentially disruptive mediations (objectifications) such as fixed prayers and icons. He develops his argument with reference to Dutch Calvinist missionary encounters and conversion processes in Indonesia, but he readily admits to being less interested in history and sociological transformation than in conceptual exploration. What links his analysis to that of Weber is the conviction that Protestant theology offers a bridge to secular narratives of modernity. For both authors the Christian religious background is crucial; within Christianity they pay sustained attention only to Protestantism, and even within Protestantism their focus is very much limited to one church tradition, that of the Calvinists.

While Keane’s studies of the Dutch Calvinist mission encounters represent one influential strand in the study of Christianity in socio-cultural anthropology, studies of Pentecostals and “salvation theology” have been more numerous in recent years. Confusingly, these too are often aligned with “modernity”, though

³ The term *Entzauberung* did not actually appear in the original version of *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, but it was used four times in the revised version of 1920.

⁴ Indeed, despite the contribution of Calvin, he seems to have seen this primarily as a German contribution. This was common among his Prussian contemporaries; cf. Adolf von Harnack’s view „And just as Eastern Christianity is rightly called Greek, and the Christianity of the Middle Ages and of Western Europe is rightly called Roman, so the Christianity of the Reformation may be described as Germanic, in spite of Calvin” (1904: 287).

in these churches *innerweltliche Askese* typically yields to the most exuberant rituals and new forms of charismatic mediation. Joel Robbins, one of the most productive scholars in this field, who carried out fieldwork in a small community of recent converts to Pentecostalism in New Guinea, tends to abstract from his own ethnography to the entire Christian tradition. He suggests that the emphasis that Melanesian converts place on rupture in their personal lives and social order can stand for a fundamental notion of discontinuity that underpins Christianity *tout court*. Whereas Cannell (2005) argues that the anthropology of religion has suffered from a Christian bias, Robbins argues that the “continuity thinking” premise of the discipline has to be overcome if we are to do justice to Christian communities. Like Webb Keane, Robbins insists that Christianity has become a global church, of which non-Western converts can be fully authentic members. This is certainly one way to theorize religious modernity. But it seems to me that all of these contemporary socio-cultural anthropologists are oblivious to the Protestant bias which colours their understandings of both Christianity and modernity. In their very different ways, all remain in thrall to Max Weber.

Catholic Counterattacks

Such is the force of the Weberian model of modernity that it is commonly equated with an implicitly unitary “Western” or “Euro-American” liberal civilization. However, as noted Weber himself he was careful to draw distinctions *within* the West. For him, the rituals and theology of Roman Catholics, whether in the Mediterranean or among the Slavs beyond the Elbe, did not differ essentially from the magical, polytheistic world of primitive peoples and were incompatible with his *telos* of rationalization. This view has recently been vigorously criticized by Roman Catholics. Anthony Carroll SJ (2007; 2009) has argued persuasively that Weber’s arguments were distorted by a Protestant “metanarrative”. According to this critique, Weber’s sociological analysis of Lutheranism and Calvinism was heavily influenced by contemporary liberal Protestant theological currents, which banished God’s grace from the natural world. Ritual was excluded from “rational” action in favour of inner-worldly asceticism, which in turn provided the alleged link to the pursuit of capitalist profit. Mysticism, in this account, is equated with other-worldly contemplation and passivity. For Carroll, as a Jesuit, this forecloses recognition of how Jesuit “contemplative action”, and many other currents since the Catholic Reformation, have contributed to the formation of the modern world. In sum, without explicitly referring to

theories of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2002), Carroll holds that the Weberian account fails to take account of distinctively Catholic modernization movements such as those led by the Jesuits in many parts of the world from the Counter-Reformation onwards.

Anthony Carroll also addresses the recent work of Charles Taylor, the most distinguished Catholic contributor to the on-going debates about the place of religion in the modern world (Taylor 2007). Taylor has his own version of a Great Divide theory. It resembles Weber's account, but Roman Catholicism is now added to form part of a unitary "north Atlantic world" in which the "conditions of belief" have been forever altered, for believers and non-believers alike. The Reformation was important, argues Taylor, but it was merely the culmination of a much older tension which he traces back through the Catholicism of the Middle Ages to Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century. When he writes of the history of Christendom and even "Orthodox Christianity", Taylor limits his purview to the West and ignores the Eastern traditions normally characterized as Orthodox. The reader is left with the impression that Eastern Christendom is a radically different world. In the West, long before the Reformation, secularity, including doubt about the transcendental God and reliance instead on an "exclusive humanism", began to spread in society. Throughout these centuries, the rest of the world was still imprisoned in what Taylor calls "naïve", unquestioning faith.

Charles Taylor privileges the notion of transcendence in his very definition of religion. Conceding that this opens up a much wider category, he then jumps to attempt some tentative comparisons with Buddhism; but he fails to develop wider comparisons and occludes Eastern Christians in order to argue for the uniqueness of the West. He has been criticized by Hans Joas for drawing his illustrations of immanent, "enchanted" religiosity exclusively from medieval Catholicism, a religion which on his own account was in fact already well on the way to bursting the limitations of "naïveté for all" (Joas 2009). Joas is critical of a Western "culturalist" bias in Taylor's work, and calls instead for investigation of the more concrete political and economic contingencies which sustained a Catholic vector of reform in the centuries before the Reformation. But on the larger questions, Joas seems to agree with Taylor. None of the Catholic scholars discussed briefly here is able to explain how the distinction between immanent and transcendent can be the defining feature of "our culture" (Taylor 2007: 16) when this is not specific either to Protestantism or to Western Christianity more generally.

Where do Eastern Christians fit in?

So far I have argued that, down to the present day, influential Western philosophers and social theorists have failed to engage significantly with Eastern Christians. Dismissive of Catholic sacramentalism, Weber seems to have judged Eastern Christians to be even further removed from the progressive Protestant sects. There is not much evidence on which to base this claim. Weber wrote little about Catholicism, though his general distaste seems to have softened with the years. He wrote even less about Eastern Christianity. This is surprising, above all in view of the fact that, soon after publishing *The Protestant Ethic*, he developed an intense interest in Russia (Weber 1995). This was prompted by the Revolution of 1905, which seems to have raised hopes that this neighbouring non-Western civilization could provide the salutary antidote for the suffocating rationalization processes to which his own civilization had succumbed. His close-up analyses of Russian politics dashed these hopes and he became increasingly unsympathetic to the “Russian drama” in the last years of his life. But what is odd, given the timing of his most intensive engagement with the situation in Russia, is that he focuses almost entirely on recent political developments. He makes no attempt to integrate religion into his analysis, let alone to probe deeper into the *Wirtschaftsethik* of the Orthodox Church, as he had done in the case of Protestantism.

Weber’s largely ahistorical approach to Russian religion and society was clearly expressed in his response to the paper given by his friend Ernst Troeltsch at the first meeting of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* in Frankfurt in 1910. Weber put forward a triangular comparison. He argued that, while the “court of last resort” in the case of the Lutherans was the “Word”, the Holy Scriptures, and for the Roman Catholics it was the Pope in Rome, for the Greek Church it was “the community of the church united in love”. This church, according to Weber, was not threatened by sectarianism but rather “saturated, in great measure, with a very specific classical mysticism”:

There lives in the Orthodox Church a specific mysticism based on the East’s unforgettable belief that brotherly love and charity, those special human relationships, which the great salvation religions have transfigured (and which seem so palid among us), that these relationships form a way not only to some social effects that are entirely incidental, but to a knowledge of the meaning of the world, to a mystical relationship to God.⁵

⁵ Weber 1973: 144–5.

Weber seems to have based this characterization on his reading of A. S. Khomiakov and the giants of literature, notably Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Russian religiosity had an acosmic “mystical substratum” which differed radically from the this-worldly orientation of the Protestant sects. While the latter were conducive to the production of a modern *Gesellschaft*, the former were conducive only to *Gemeinschaft*.⁶

Weber seems to have paid little attention to Eastern theology. As with Catholicism, he was dismissive of anything which deviated from the norms of modern Protestantism, as elaborated by Troeltsch. The unchanging “classical mysticism” he sees in Orthodox Christianity is entirely different from Troeltsch’s use of the concept of mysticism to denote modern individualist spirituality. Weber’s failure to historicise religion and society in Russia conforms to the general Western treatment of Byzantium, exemplified in the work of Edward Gibbon. The shorthand term for this nowadays is “orientalism”, but in all the work inspired by Edward Said it is seldom recognized that orientalism begins within Christianity. As Ken Parry has pointed out, the Byzantine Empire has generally been presented “as if suspended in formaldehyde like some kind of rare specimen waiting for a later generation to dissect it”. Parry argues that Byzantine intellectual history did indeed exhibit more continuity than Western Christianity in the centuries after Constantine (the “dark ages”), but he shows that a deep commitment to *paradosis* is no justification for detaching the empire from real history:

Byzantine culture was in many ways retrospective and backward looking, but this should not be understood in a pejorative sense. The fact that it looked back to earlier models for its inspiration does not mean that it was caught in a time-warp of its own making of which it was unaware.⁷

Having excluded Eastern Christians from the West, the strange truth is that it has proved easier for Western theorists, in the steps of Weber, to acknowledge a distinctively Confucian or Hindi “alternative” modernity than to examine what sort of modernity might be possible for fellow Christians on their doorstep. It is easier to attribute “dematerialization” to a theological Big Bang in the sixteenth century than to trace centuries of iconoclastic controversy preceding the Great Schism. Just as Weber was influenced by a Prussian Protestant metanarrative, perhaps today’s US cultural anthropologists are inclined to tie sincerity and the

⁶ Ferdinand Tönnies, who coined this dichotomy, was one of Weber’s debating partners at this session of the Frankfurt conference. The others were Georg Simmel and Ernst Troeltsch.

⁷ Parry 2009: 30.

emergence of the modern subject to the puritanical representational economy and *discontinuity* that were so important in the formation of their own country. Webb Keane might argue that only Protestantism succeeded in disseminating the ideal of sincerity, stripped of objectifications, outside tiny elites to encompass the mass of believers. But the very fact that Russian authors are acknowledged to be among the finest exponents of the novel, a modern genre *par excellence*, which certainly engaged with issues of individual sincerity, shows the limitations of the “West versus the rest” boundary which Keane implicitly endorses.

Of course anthropologists are not the major players when it comes to occluding or orientalisising Eastern Christians and their histories. It is difficult for any scholars (regardless of field) to outline these histories impartially when Orthodox Churches are widely accused of flying in the face of “European values”. Greece, which figures so prominently in Europeanist rhetoric by virtue of its pre-Orthodox past (Herzfeld 1987), is a long-running target of these insinuations. Only recently have researchers inside and outside anthropology begun to explore what new patterns might be emerging in those large Orthodox populations which were subjected to the repressive policies of “scientific Atheism” until two decades ago (Roudometof, Pankhurst and Agadjanian 2005). These scholars face a double trap, since the long-term otherness of Eastern Christianity has been compounded by the overlay of the uniquely modern alterity created by the Iron Curtain. Even sociologists of religion as sophisticated as David Martin allow their distaste for communism to cement stereotypes of a “ritualistic” Orthodoxy tied everywhere to national identities, in opposition to a globalized Western Christianity in which the differences between Catholic and Protestant traditions have been largely overcome (Martin 2011). This tallies of course with highly influential theories which assert a fundamental or *civilizational* divide between Eastern and Western Christianity. The model of the late US political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996) is explicitly conflictual. It has had tremendous impact on policy-making and the popular geopolitical imagination in the two decades since the end of the Cold War. But what are the objective grounds for classifying Eastern Christianity as a separate civilization? Such a classification suggests that we have not advanced very far since the theories of Max Weber more than a century ago.

Thus Eastern Christianity remains mired in ancient stereotypes. It is hard to see how a counterattack analogous to the Catholic counterattack described above could be launched. The greater degree of doctrinal continuity and conservatism in the Eastern Churches is irrefutable. There is no parallel to the Jesuit engage-

ment with science and modernization around the world. Orthodox Churches too have expanded in recent centuries, notably across Siberia, but they have not become “global sects”, i.e. voluntary associations of believers, in the way that Catholicism and Protestantism compete globally. Orthodoxy has remained to a much greater extent a matter of birthright; it is present in North America and Australia in national (Greek, Serb, Russian etc.) rather than transnational form. These legacies also have a direct bearing on the frequent allegation that Eastern Christian Churches have no coherent social welfare policies and have failed adequately to acknowledge religious human rights (notably the right of freedom to proselytize).

On the other hand, the Orthodox Churches are in principle no more beholden to the state than the Anglicans or the state Churches of Lutheranism. Their decentralized, conciliar organization is surely more modern than the inflexible hierarchies of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of Anthony Carroll’s Jesuit strictures against Max Weber can be readily reformulated from an Orthodox point of view. Orthodoxy shares with Catholicism its notion of the human person as the image of God and its integration of the mystical and contemplative into human action. The bigger question here concerns the significance of theology for the interplay between religion and social transformation. Weber viewed Trinitarian theology as a relapse to polytheism, though both Eastern and Western Christians continue to view it as an advance in the Church Fathers’ intellectual specification of the one God (McMylor and Vorozhishcheva 2007: 465). Of course many dogmas remain controversial. Had he paid closer attention to the protracted debates about the *filioque*, still unresolved in the present ecumenical era, Weber might have been obliged to conclude that, since the Western Churches were more committed to the position that God’s spirit passed “through the son” to the Holy Ghost, they, rather than the Eastern Churches, were guilty of a greater deviation from rigorous, austere monotheism.

I am not seeking to deny important differences in intellectual history and theology. Associating Protestantism with the elimination of images, medieval Roman Catholicism with the rise of figurative interpretations of holy persons, and Eastern Christianity with more conservative icon representations, is not entirely false. But these debates stem from common sources and the historical record provides no grounds for extrapolating from aesthetics and theology to the evolution of social institutions and economic expansion. The commercial enterprise of Armenian communities inside and outside the Byzantine and Ottoman empires is powerful evidence that nothing in the theology of the East contributed

a barrier to the extension of trade when the conditions were favourable (Hann and Goltz 2010: 3). For more than half of its history the “civilizational” advantages lay with the East: Byzantium was by far the largest city in Europe. London, even after it became Protestant, remained provincial in comparison. That those cities and their respective churches later followed divergent paths surely owes rather little to theological differences. As Vasilios Makrides has argued in a balanced assessment, the reasons why Eastern Christians have not participated to the same extent as their Western counterparts in long-term processes of rationalization and modernization are better viewed as contingent; there are no grounds for attributing them to essentialist, immutable characteristics of their churches and their doctrines (Makrides 2005).

Enter the Ethnographers

The contribution of socio-cultural anthropologists to understandings of Eastern Christianities has so far been distinctly limited. For reasons of accessibility, the Anglophone ethnographic literature was for many years focused largely on Greece.⁸ Charles Stewart’s (1991) study of how Great and Little Traditions merged in the practical religion of the inhabitants of Naxos was a landmark. Contrary to Robbins’ arguments for discontinuity as the hallmark of Christianity, here the emphasis was placed firmly on liturgical tradition and conservatism. Despite the moment of rupture that forms a necessary element in any prophetic religion, the Greek Orthodox Church represented itself in its doctrines as a continuous body of believers; and Stewart found this to be confirmed in the practices of its members, whose contemporary demonology could be traced back to pre-Christian origins. Roger Just (1988), writing about another island in the same period, showed that popular anticlericalism in no way detracted from the importance of religion as a marker of collective (national) identity. Renée Hirschon’s recent study of urban changes (2010) confirms the impression that these Christians are only now starting to discover individualism.

Similar messages, including an implicit contrast with the Christianity of the West, emerge from much of the recent ethnography of Eastern Christian com-

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Here as throughout this lecture, “eastern” is potentially misleading, conveying a distorted impression of global Christianity. I concentrate on Eastern Orthodox Christians associated historically with Byzantium because the anthropological literature on the “Oriental” Orthodox Christians, e.g. in Baghdad, or Alexandria, or Addis Ababa, is even more sparse.

munities in the former socialist countries. This is of course a context of massive discontinuity, which must be born in mind in interpreting local emphasis on long-term continuities and the role of religion in collective identification. Numerous observers have highlighted the perfunctory, superficial performance of rituals rather than reflection on their meaning. For example, Tobias Köllner (2010) was struck by the propensity of new entrepreneurs to have their offices and factories blessed by Orthodox priests. It is of course much easier to observe ritual performance than to gain access to the inner states of the actors during or after their performances. Köllner implies that the degree of spirituality among some of the businessmen he knew was rather low; but he points out that others had intimate links to a personal confessor, and that clergy were highly critical of those whose religious behaviour was merely ritualistic. Like other researchers in our Focus Group at Halle, he was struck by “multiple moralities” (Zigon 2011b). For example, Detalina Tocheva shows in this volume that charitable donations within the Orthodox Church are a form of secular, non-ritualistic behaviour which has come to form part of what it means to be religious in today’s Russia. In another study, Tocheva (2011) scrutinizes the multiple origins of religious ethics with respect to gifts to beggars, arguing that both the Russian Orthodox Church and the legacy of Soviet socialism emphasize an ethics based on society rather than the individual. By contrast, Jarrett Zigon, who focused on the work of the Orthodox Church in drug rehabilitation programmes in St Petersburg, emphasized how addicts were taught to “work on the self”, in a manner which modified Orthodox theology with completely new notions of competence in a globalized neoliberal environment (Zigon 2011a). The “self” in this ethnography seems to resemble the familiar Western self; consequently Zigon finds it easy to apply the theories of Michel Foucault in this context.

Much depends not only on what kind of people one chooses to study, and perhaps too on the temperament of the researcher. The Russian Orthodox pilgrims studied by Jeanne Kormina (2010) resembled secular tourists, whose bus trips maintained the Soviet tradition of the works outing. In contrast, those studied by Inna Naletova (2010) certainly did have strong emotional, internal experiences. It is surely no accident that the latter researcher shared the faith of those she was studying, while the former distanced herself from them and chose to apply theoretical paradigms from the sociological literature on tourism. In any case, the range documented here does not differ from what we know from anthropological studies of popular Roman Catholic pilgrimage sites.

Two young Western-trained anthropologists have applied cognitive theories to Eastern Christian communities, notably Harvey Whitehouse's dichotomy between the doctrinal and the imagistic modes of religiosity, itself heavily marked by the Protestant tradition. Alice Forbess (2010) found during her work in a Romanian convent that nuns paid little heed to texts and acquired their knowledge primarily from charismatic seniors. Vlad Naumescu, who worked with Greek Catholics in the Western Ukraine, elaborates a more complex historical analysis (2008). While the imagistic mode of religiosity was dominant while this Church was repressed during the socialist decades, the doctrinal has reasserted itself since the re-legalization of this Church in the 1990s, when formal hierarchical structures replaced the "catacomb" church. Sensuous rituals remain extremely important, as Naumescu found with the efflorescence of exorcism rituals in a newly established monastery, for which there was obviously strong demand in a society severely affected by postsocialist dislocation. More generally, he argues that Orthodox Christianity maintains a distinctive balance between Whitehouse's contrasting modes. This seems to resemble the balance between *logos* and *icon* which Orthodox theologians believe has been disrupted in Western traditions, Catholic and Protestant alike.

The Greek Catholics are a group of particular interest in scrutinizing Great Divide theories. They belong to both East and West, since they acknowledge the Pope as the head of their Church while retaining the "practical religion" of their Orthodox neighbours, notably the Byzantine liturgy. They were not required to include the *filioque* in their recitation of the creed, despite its requirement according to Latin theology. In practice there was nonetheless considerable "acculturation". Unequal power relations were the key factor in explaining why many features of the Latin Church were adopted in the East, such as more figurative icons, only to be challenged through periodic assertions of purification (Mahieu and Naumescu 2008). Yet, as Naumescu's Ukrainian materials show, such churches were able to survive decades of repression and re-emerge strongly after socialism. The existence of such interstitial groups does not invalidate the East-West boundary, but it has led me to question the notion of civilizational difference of the kind put forward by Huntington (Hann 2006a, 2006b).

The theology and materiality of icons have been recently studied by Sonja Luhrmann in Marii El (Russian Federation), where she found that Protestant missionaries were more tolerant of "pagan idolatry" than they were of "icon worship" by members of the Russian Orthodox Church, and by Gabriel Hanganu in Eastern Romania. Both find it helpful to conceptualise interaction with icons

as *social* relations. Hanganu argues that Eastern Christians elaborate in their theology and practices a version of “distributed personhood” which falls somewhere in between an English notion of the individual self and Marilyn Strathern’s Melanesian “dividuals”. According to the theology, one sacred image is as good as any other, but in practice villagers will go to great lengths to take particular “highly charged” icons with well-known “biographies” to their fields when praying for rain. The theology of the Eastern Churches has contributed to practices which differ from those of most Western Christians. But neither Hanganu nor any of the other anthropologists I have mentioned provide any evidence that “internal states” are different from those of other Christians. Whether or not people really *believe* that the icon establishes an invisible tie to the deity, there is no evidence that Orthodoxy is any more an obstruction to the utilitarian pursuit of interest than the equivalent Confucian rituals in China over the centuries, where it might be similarly misleading to presume a complete *lack* of interest in meaning and belief.

This stream of Christianity may bear the name Orthodoxy, but by emphasizing the performance of rituals and topics such as icons and exorcism, some of these anthropological accounts imply that Orthopraxy would be more appropriate; and that Eastern Christians are somehow different from the West in this respect, just as Weber and his panel members agreed a century ago. I suggest that we see here the legacy of the age-old bias, which leads us to privilege text-based faith and interior states in our definition of religion. Ritual practice retains its fundamental significance in Western Christianity too, but we tend to overlook this in order to highlight a contrast to all the others. Again, it is not my purpose to deny all differences. But, following Makrides (2005), I interpret these as contingent, not immutable. Thus in contemporary Greece the anthropologist who extends his gaze beyond the rural parish community soon stumbles upon contemporary phenomena very similar to those found in other traditions, including text-based “rigorism” and the search for new forms of individualized spirituality. Charles Stewart found that, at the time of his research among Naxos villagers, experiences of the mystical and supernatural were actually more widespread among the urban middle classes in Athens. Villagers had evidently internalized modern scientific skepticism toward irrational phenomena, but city dwellers remained one step ahead and preserved their cultural hegemony (Stewart 1989). In short, changing social relations shape the religious field very directly. From this social perspective, the individualization described by Hirschon (2010) in Greek family rituals and the expression of identity represents a convergence with gen-

eral social behaviour: the Orthodox faith has never been a hindrance to the exercise of individual agency (Herzfeld 2002).

There is no space here for a comprehensive review of this expanding literature on Eastern Christians, which is still in its infancy, and for the development of which it is important to move beyond ethnographic case studies and work closely with theologians and church historians. Let me close by noting Douglas Rogers' outstanding historical ethnography of Old Believers in the Urals (2009). The very survival of "priestless" communities in this remote location is a reminder that the Eastern Churches are as diverse as the better known Churches of the West. These Old Believers maintained an ethical continuity through the most dramatic changes in secular regimes. This is most evident in the asceticism of their elders, whose aversion to money is still evident in the turmoil of the post-socialist years. Rogers was a student of Webb Keane and he pays close attention to the materiality of the Old Believers' faith. But he is gently critical of Keane and Joel Robbins for their failure to engage with other Christians. Rogers proposes instead a richer, more social understanding of Old Believer personhood: a Maussian corrective to the currently dominant Foucauldian approach.

The Axial Age and the Eurasian Miracle

The long overdue expansion of the repertoire of socio-cultural anthropology to include Eastern Christians is not going to resolve the basic problem that the dominant social science model of modernity continues to privilege one strand of just one of the so-called "world religions"; and more specifically notions of belief and individuality highlighted in the *discourses* of that strand and its offshoots, which do not necessarily provide accurate indications of actual differences in thought and behaviour. As I have noted, within a few generations of Weber's elaboration of the Protestant ethic it has come to be recognized that he exaggerated the rupture of the Reformation. Medieval Catholicism contained the same vector of reform. Twentieth century Roman Catholicism proved itself capable of further reforms and able to compete for believers in new religious markets in Africa and Asia. Differences in theology and social policies remain, but Catholics are no longer routinely accused of contradicting the principles of human rights. Rather, an impartial social scientist is more likely to conclude that they have somewhat different answers (to those of Protestants and those of the secularized liberal intelligentsia) to the same fundamental issues of value.

It may not be too much to hope that Orthodox Christianity will experience a similar process of recognition in the decades ahead. At present it remains tarred with the hoary brush of caesaropapism; the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church to develop a social policy have not been convincing to liberals in that country. However, just as Catholic doctrines of “personalism” have gradually gained acceptance as a legitimate alternative to Protestant individualist conceptions of human rights, so we should not rule out the possibility that Orthodox doctrines, currently dismissed in the West, will eventually be recognized as equally valid ways of asserting rights and social entitlements which are ultimately very similar. The emphasis on historic communities may in the long term come to be seen as more conducive to religious tolerance than the aggressive promotion of the liberal market model (see Ghodsee 2009 for an instructive case study from Bulgaria). Orthodox Churches have a long way to go, and they will never have the resources to compete alongside the major Western Churches in regions remote from their home bases. But then again, why should this be the decisive criterion for the modernity of a religion, and what is the role of religion in modernity generally?

One influential paradigm in recent years is that associated primarily with the late Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt. In his perspective, religious ideas remain of basic importance, but he identifies “multiple modernities” rather than a single Weberian model by which all the others must be assessed (Eisenstadt 2002). These multiple modernities can be traced back to the much earlier breakthroughs of the Axial Age in various regions of the Eurasian landmass (Arnason, Eisenstadt and Wittrok 2005). As mentioned, Max Weber himself made a brilliant analysis of the same root tension in his work on the ancient Jews. In short, there are no grounds for privileging the Western streams of Christianity, since similar notions of transcendence and discontinuity are found in all prophetic religions.

But problems remain with this paradigm, quite apart from the fact that the status of Eastern Christians remains murky. Hinduism and Buddhism may at a pinch be squeezed in alongside the Abrahamic religions, but “Chinese religion” evidently lacks any comparable notion of transcendence. Yet China was at the forefront of economic, scientific, “civilizational” advances for many centuries and is moving ever closer to re-assuming that role today. If the multiple modernities paradigm is to include China, as it surely must, then we have to acknowl-

edge that “this-worldly” Confucian values differ significantly from the other world religions.⁹

The Chinese case leads me to suggest another way forward, unusual among Western social theorists. We should consider the possibility that theological doctrines and religion more are simply irrelevant to the evolution of social and economic institutions. Without engaging explicitly with the theorists of the Axial Age, the British social anthropologist Jack Goody (2006; 2010) has elaborated comparably broad perspectives, opposed to what he sees as the Eurocentrism of the Weberian approach. Goody criticizes previous diagnoses of a “European miracle” and proposes instead a “Eurasian miracle”. He rejects the term modernity as a constantly “moving target”. What counts in his view is that East and West competed with each other and “alternated” in technological superiority over millennia. Only at the beginning of the nineteenth century did the West achieve a decisive breakthrough through industrialization; religion played no significant role in this achievement.

Conclusions

Social scientific analysis of the role of religions in world history needs to overcome its entrenched parochialism in North-West Europe. The first step is to expose the ethnocentrism and contradictions of the existing literature, in which Max Weber is the outstanding figure. I have pointed to a few glaring examples in this lecture. The Protestant tradition cannot stand for “the West” or for the whole of Christianity. Christian theological debates have their roots in the “Middle East”, as do the other “Abrahamic religions”, with their closely related notions of monotheistic transcendence. These can be fruitfully connected in turn to the transformations of the Axial Age. But those transformations did not everywhere lead to such notions of transcendence. The enormous contributions of East Asia to the formation of the modern world over more than two millennia cannot be squeezed into any ideal type of Protestant modernity.

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It is not surprising that the concept of Orthopraxy has enjoyed some popularity in Anglophone studies of Chinese religion; my point, as already noted above, is that multifarious rituals did not hinder economic enterprise and innovation.

If “Protestant” impulses can be distinguished in contemporary Buddhism, this is more likely to be a consequence of contemporary changes in those societies than a prime *cause* of them; but why should we classify this as more “modern” than state appropriation of religion as national heritage?

Eastern Christians have their own complex histories, including disputes over theology as well as ecclesiastical organization, problematic relations with secular powers, and missionary expansion. Many emphasize that element in their traditions which stresses tradition itself, as emphasized by Charles Stewart in Greece and Douglas Rogers for the Old Believers in the Urals. In the twentieth century, many Byzantine rite Christians put even more emphasis on tradition very consciously, in opposition to a detested socialist blueprint of modernity. This is not hard to understand, and comparable phenomena can be found in Catholicism. It is not to be confused with stagnation. No religious community stagnates; rather, the balance of continuity and change is in constant flux. Eastern Christians are coeval with their Western counterparts and everyone else on this increasingly globalized planet. Why should certain Protestant notions exaggerating discontinuity be construed as a norm? It is true, as Hermann Goltz liked to point out, that some Western Christians have been prone to construct an idealized unchanging Orthodoxy as a corrective to their own discomforts; but this is no reason to deny the historicity and “agency” of those Eastern Christians.

This position of coevalness, the socio-cultural anthropologist’s baseline, is entirely compatible with the recognition that over the last few centuries one particular religious tradition has been much more powerful than others. Economic and political trends today suggest that this era is over and a shift back to East Asian dominance is already well advanced. But even if we continue – arbitrarily – to define this Western, Weberian model as the paradigm of modernity, it does not follow that this modernity *originated* with Calvinism or with the Protestant Reformation more generally. From the perspective of the Axial Age theorists there are no plausible grounds for attempting to explain the breakthrough to our contemporary world with reference to particular strands or sub-strands of Western Christianity. The theologies of the Reformation, the impulse to reform, internal states and “dematerialization” have plentiful precedents not only in medieval Catholicism but also in the Eastern Christian Churches and outside Christianity (see Wengrow 2010).

In the conceptual and historical analysis of these patterns, social anthropologists obviously rely heavily on other specialists, including theologians. But there is still a lot more to be done in terms of ethnographic analysis. I have reviewed

some of the recent contributions to the Anglophone literature on one segment of the Eastern Churches. The next phase would ideally involve more comparative studies, in order to ascertain more precisely the ways in which Eastern and Western Christians resemble and differ from each other, now and in the past. From church-state relations to the micro-organization of parish life, the range of under-studied topics is enormous; to study internal states of belief is more problematic, as Evans-Pritchard recognized, and therefore our need of interdisciplinary help in this regard will be even greater.

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