

Zuzanna Bogumił

John P. Burgess. *Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017. 264 pp. ISBN 978-0-300-22224-1.

Zuzanna Bogumił, Institute of Archeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences. Address for correspondence: Institute of Archeology and Ethnology, Al. Solidarności 105, 00-140 Warsaw, Poland. zbogumil@iaepan.edu.pl.

John Burgess's book both fascinates and disappoints the reader. Through interesting microhistories, the book gives a fresh and unique access to the contemporary Russian Orthodox lived religion. It is even more fascinating as it is written by an American Presbyterian theologian who became fascinated by Orthodox Christianity and its vision of Russia. To such a point that during one Easter morning, he "could glimpse Holy Rus'" (p. 4). However, the way the author understands Holy Rus' and describes the link between Orthodoxy and the Russian nation leaves the reader with more questions than answers. One may say that my criticism is unfounded because Burgess clearly states at the beginning of the book that his definition of Holy Rus' is "personal and idiosyncratic" (p. 5). But at the same time the author does not want his book to be perceived as "a journalistic report" and declares that his goal is to show "that the Orthodox Church in Russia today is seeking to re-create ... Holy Rus'" (p. 5). Is it really the conclusion that emerges from the book?

To start, I want to stress that my rather critical assessment of the book is not a result of the clash of different approaches—religious and secular, respectively—that Burgess and I have. As an anthropologist conducting research among Orthodox believers in Russia, I look at ongoing discussions between anthropologists and theologians with keen scientific interest and I find works of theologians such as John Milbank, Karl Barth, or Hans Frei very stimulating. I miss such literature by the Russian Orthodox writers. Thus, I was very interested to see how a professor of theology understands and explains the rebirth of the Russian Orthodox Church and how his perspective enriches our secular understanding of the processes taking place in Russia. I thought that the book may fill the existing gap in the literature—by eschewing both a laudatory Orthodox perspective from the inside and a secular liberal and overly critical perspective from the outside, by proposing new concepts and tools to analyze ongoing processes. However, I have the impression that Burgess failed to achieve these goals and his description of the way Russians are building a new nation is a reflection of his personal wishful thinking rather than results of his study.

As a teacher of theology with great knowledge of Western Christianity—Protestantism and Catholicism—Burgess decided to learn more about Eastern Orthodoxy. In 2004 he spent his sabbatical year in Russia and in 2011–2012 he came for another extended stay. In between, he visited Russia many times on shorter trips. In the beginning he wanted to work in the libraries and study the Orthodox theology, but as his knowledge of the Russian language was insufficient for scholarly

research, he started to visit parishes and monasteries and talk to priests, monks, laypeople, and parishioners to understand what he calls “lived theology” (p. 5). As he stresses, “it is on the basis of these many personal encounters that I make my case, namely, that the Orthodox Church in Russia today is seeking to re-create ... Holy Rus’” (p. 5).

What Burgess’s book offers, thus, is the ethnographic theology. The ethnographic theology is a rapidly developing spiritual discipline, generously drawing on anthropology. Unlike ethnographic research, it does not focus on “analysis of Christian practices” but rather engage in “analysis from Christian practices” (Wigg-Stevenson 2017:423; emphasis in the original). Ethnographic theology helps theologians gain critical reflexive distance from the Christian social practices by giving tools to investigate theological traditions “embedded and embodied” in the lives and practices of everyday communities and not in theological texts (Scharen and Vigen 2011). Consequently, academic theologians have insight into local theological knowledge and may juxtapose it with traditional theological knowledge in order to better understand Christian living. Dialogue between ethnographic theologians and anthropologists of Christianity is perceived by some researchers as a chance to open the field for new epistemological possibilities (Meneses et al. 2014). However, Burgess does not refer to the methods of and literature on ethnographic theology, and, as a result, his book is somewhat parallel to the ongoing vigorous discussion on the ethnographic turn in Christian theology and ethics.

Burgess is an amateur ethnographic theologian who kicks at an open door. He has great ethnographic skills and does his analysis with great sensitivity and respect for those who agreed to encounters with him. Existing works by ethnographic theologians mostly investigate the researcher’s own religious culture. Burgess’s book could have been an important voice in the discussion as he writes from a double-outsider perspective: he is interested in religiosity of people of a different culture—Russians—and a different denomination—Orthodoxy. But the fact that Burgess does not refer to ethnographic theology literature greatly weakens the book’s impact.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each dedicated to a different aspect of church life—Holy Rus’, the rebirth of Orthodoxy, religious education, social ministry, the new martyrs, parish life—with the final chapter making some predictions about the future of the Orthodox Church in Russian society. If read separately, each chapter offers a thick description (Geertz 1973) of a chosen aspect of church life. These chapters in a very convincing way present the production of theological knowledge. At the same time, Burgess is silent about the political dimension of Holy Rus’ and does not discuss the relationship between President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the beginning of the book the author stresses that Western researchers have “obsession with Putin” and are “skeptical, even cynical, about a Church that seems hopelessly compromised by worldly wealth and political manipulation. But the story has another side that many of us do not yet know” (p. 10). He wishes to present this other side in the book and tries to convince the reader that Holy Rus’ is the “Orthodoxy’s vision of transcendent beauty”

(p. 209) that exists in the minds of ordinary priests, lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and the social activity in which they engage. As a result, "Russia ... is indeed healthier, more vital society today because of these efforts" (p. 208). As a result, Burgess's understanding of Holy Rus' is very idealistic and wishful.

However, the concept of Holy Rus', by definition, indicates the penetration of the Christian religion into the mythology of the state and the intrusion of world imperialism into the body of the Church (Cherniavsky 1958). Moreover, recent publications show that the concept of Holy Rus' is strongly "geo-politicized" by Patriarch Kirill, who uses it to recolonize the Russian population and create a new geopolitical utopia (Suslov 2014). For some reason, Burgess decided not to enter into a critical discussion with this scholarship and explain why in his view this political dimension is less important than the social dimension that he describes. It is even more astonishing because in several places in the book Burgess accuses the Church of cooperating too closely with the state, however, while describing Holy Rus', he is silent about this aspect. It is clear that he is aware of the full complexity of the idea but does not present it, and instead he constructs an ideal picture. Why does he do this?

It appears to be a result of self-censorship in which Burgess engaged because of the ethical dilemma he faced while writing the book. It is a typical problem that many anthropologists have to face when they start writing up their research and realize that they feel personal responsibility for the welfare of their interlocutors. Burgess stresses many times that many of the people who he had talked to became his friends. He seems to omit those aspects of Holy Rus', and the Church reality generally, that he thinks may have a negative impact on the image of his interlocutor-friends and, more broadly, on the activities of the Orthodox Church. However, by omitting the political dimension he also silences those aspects of the church-state-society relationship that could positively affect the Church's image and strengthen Burgess's view of the Russian Orthodox Church as the biggest nongovernmental, civil society organization in Russia.

Description of the Church's civic activities is also limited. Burgess focuses on intrachurch activities and those *performed* by the Church *for* the civil society. Burgess does not show how the Church cooperates with other civil society organizations or other religious organizations to create a pluralistic civil society, even if in some spheres of social life this cooperation is visible. He also does not show the impact of activities of other civil society organizations and the religious groups on the Orthodox activity, even if these influences are always mutual. Dale Soden (2015), for instance, has shown how newcomers to the Pacific Northwest—Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—felt unfamiliar with the frontier culture that the first settlers had founded in this region and, therefore, they started to work together to transform the space in accordance with their common expectations. It was not an easy process; there were some traditionalists who opposed it. However, in all churches there were people who, despite their religious differences, were willing to cooperate in the name of a higher social goal that they shared. This interreligious cooperation, according to Soden, led to the construction of a very open and progressive civil society in the American Pacific Northwest.

During perestroika the dialogue between different religious and secular groups to achieve a common goal—the demolition of communism—was also very visible in the Soviet Union. However, with the political change, the polarization among these groups has sharpened as each of them has a different vision of the postcommunist future. It does not mean, however, that there is no cooperation, and Father Georgii Kochetkov, founder of the Transfiguration Brotherhood, serves as a great example of a church leader who developed the relationship with the laity (Daniel 2006). Interestingly, he is also an example of a church leader who cooperates more willingly with some secular organizations than with religious ones, because his vision of some aspects of social life is closer to their vision than to the vision of his opponents inside the Church. For instance, Kochetkov willingly cooperates with the Memorial Society and actively opposes commemorative activities of Metropolitan Tikhon Shevkunov, saying that the latter serve the state and not God.

Burgess is silent about the Church's cooperation with civic organizations. It seems also that he deliberately ignores the activities of Kochetkov, even though this church leader seems to illustrate the best Burgess's position about the separation of church and state and his understanding of pluralistic societies (p. 222). At the same time, Burgess praises Metropolitan Tikhon, whom he presents as a charismatic leader capable of drawing millions of people with his vision of Orthodoxy. At the same time, he ignores all of Metropolitan's political activity, his close ties with Putin, his state-oriented cultural activities, and serious conflicts with some priests from different religious brotherhoods. Burgess's enthusiastic assessment of Metropolitan's role in the church and society comes from his encounter with him, reading of the book *Everyday Saints and Other Stories*, written by Metropolitan Tikhon, and his regular participation in the Bible study classes on Friday evenings at Stretenskii Monastery, headed at the time by Tikhon. In my opinion, Tikhon Shevkunov is the antithesis of Burgess's ideas about the state-church separation; however, Burgess admires him and writes that "perhaps Bishop Tikhon is also an unholy holy one" (p. 71).

Finally, it is important to stress that even if Burgess writes that the Russian Orthodox Church is only one of many civic organizations in pluralistic Russia, he uses the terms Russians and Orthodox believers synonymously. The book is full of over-generalizations such as "Holy Rus' belongs to Russians' own aspirations of what makes Russia most truly 'Russia'" (p. 3). On multiple occasions while reading the book I had an impression that Burgess ignores the fact that Russia is multireligious, multinational, and multicultural federal state where very different visions of "us" coexist. If Holy Rus' is shared by all these different Russians, it is in its secular, national vision. It is a version forced by the Putin's regime, among others, thanks to a highly propagandistic project of historical parks "Russian—My History" conceived by Shevkunov. The result of this is that I am unable to treat Burgess's *Holy Rus'* as a critical theological contribution to the discussion of the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the twenty-first century, but rather see it as a very personal autobiographical story of a Protestant minister who is fascinated by Russia and Orthodox Christianity.

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