Social Forms in Orthodox Christian Convert Communities in North America

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Abstract   *The Orthodox Church is considered a rather conservative body – akin to the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless – or precisely for that reason – it has attracted converts from the other mainstream denominations who seek an ecclesiastical home grounded on a traditional theological basis. For many Orthodox converts in the United States, the Orthodox Church is seen as a refuge from rampant liberalism and social relativism expressed in fluid gender identities and the waning of traditional values. As such, the Orthodox Church offers them a 'counter-structure' to the secular and mainstream world 'out there'. In this contribution, we analyze the way Orthodox Christian convert communities in the US use various social forms in order to create this image of the Orthodox Church as a divinely inspired counterculture. These social forms in the convert milieus pose a challenge to existing Orthodox Christian communities, who are often more concerned with ethnic and cultural affiliation and wish to integrate into Western culture.*

Keywords   *diaspora, migrant religion, migration, Orthodox Church, reactive online Orthodoxy, religious conversion*

1.   Introduction

The origins of the Orthodox Church lie in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, where Christianity first grew as a movement within the Roman Empire in the first centuries CE and from the 4th century as the state religion of the empire. The separation between Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic Christianity is conventionally dated to the year 1054, although the actual alienation between the two parts occurred much earlier in a rather subtle fashion (Chadwick 2003). Numerous theological, liturgical, and political differences

between the two halves of Christendom ensured that a reconciliation had become impossible by the 16th century. One of these differences was the assertion that the church did not represent a counterpart to secular society or state politics but was an integral part of it (Höpken/Rimestad forthcoming). This emphasis might not have been unique to the Eastern Orthodox Church, but it has since the early 20th century been at the center of Orthodox theology's identity vis-à-vis Western Christianity.

As such, from the emic perspective of Orthodox theology, the Orthodox Church cannot be analyzed from the vantage point of social forms. In its self-understanding, just as that of the Roman Catholic Church, the church does not have a social form, it encompasses the social in its entirety. For most of the 2000-year history of the Orthodox Church and its antecedents, it was enough to consider every baptized individual a part of the Church, which would exist wherever there was a church and parish. Ironically, this globalized narrative could only exist because Orthodoxy functioned as a "cultural church"; that is to say, a religious community embedded in a particular homogeneous cultural (and frequently geographic and political) context in which it acted as societal glue as much as ideological community. Baptism, which normatively occurred in infancy, was the only requirement for membership, as it encompassed the vast majority of members of the community without further inquiry which might produce dissension and conflict. Even today, and even in far less homogenous contexts, Orthodox theologians still actively resist looking at the church as a separate part of society at large. There is no concept of membership beyond baptism, unlike in Western churches, where membership is often connected with following rules, participating in ceremonies, or paying membership fees. Even when one looks at the Orthodox Church from a social scientific perspective, it is difficult to frame it in terms of social forms. In the core region of the Orthodox Church, it is seldom an organization with defined membership and clear goals, but rather an all-encompassing institution with a clear hierarchy, which anybody can seek out to satisfy their religious needs.

However, in those regions where the Orthodox Church has traditionally not been dominant, such as in Western Europe and North America, the Christian Orthodox presence is relatively young and does not represent the majority faith. It is therefore subject to the three processes outlined in the introduction to this volume, both within the church and in its relations to the surrounding social world: (1) the societalization of communitization implies that hierarchical structures are less important, while community elements gain in prevalence; (2) the empowering of the individual is a process that is more obvious in

this part of the world than in more traditionally Orthodox regions; and (3) the competition among religions is a core feature of the North American religious landscape.

These three processes, which are usually perceived by Orthodox Christians as external influences, alien to the Orthodox faith, do play a peculiar role in the development of Orthodox Christianity in Western Europe and, especially, North America. Unlike the Western Christian denominations, which developed somewhat organically together with modernity, the Orthodox Church has developed a narrative of being at odds with modern developments. Its encounter with such developments began with the Enlightenment and secularization from the 18th century onwards, which first introduced the idea of non-religious social coherence (Roudometof 1998). However, a real encounter with Western modernity only occurred when a significant migration of Orthodox faithful, especially in the 20th century, diversified and dispersed the global Orthodox presence (Rimestad 2021).

This contribution analyzes the particular way these two processes impacted the social forms that Christian Orthodox communities have taken in the North American diaspora. They include the individual parish as a close-knit group and the auxiliary organizations that structure parish outreach. At the same time, the Orthodox Church in North America is not a single structure but consists of several parallel, ethnically connoted jurisdictional organizations. Finally, in an era the two sociologists Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman have diagnosed as "networked individualism" with its own "operating system" (Rainie/Wellman 2012: 6–7), the social form of a network is also making inroads into the Orthodox Church.

Rainie and Wellman argued that networked individualism relies on internet communication, enabled by the "Triple Revolution" of social networks beyond the tight and homogeneous group, of communication technologies involving the internet, and of mobility induced through ever-smaller cell phones (ibid.: 11–12). The two sociologists focused on the positive aspects of networked individualism, which are undeniable. However, there is an increasing awareness of the detrimental effects of the Triple Revolution, which has become rather visible among US-American converts to the Orthodox Church.

These developments do not only appear in the Orthodox Church in North America from within but are often introduced by zealous converts from Western denominations. In some cases, one can even observe that novel social forms function in opposition to more traditional Orthodox ways of community. Also, the culture wars of the 20th and 21st centuries in the US (Hartman 2019) are

heavily influencing the way Orthodox Christians in North America live their faith and coalesce into the social form of networks, often displaying the same polarization of American society as can be observed in other arenas.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three parts. The following part (2.) analyzes the historical development of the Orthodox Church outside of the areas that have traditionally been Eastern Orthodox, especially North America. This is important to understand the three levels of Orthodox Christianity in the USA and their corresponding social forms. Then we turn to the phenomenon of conversion to Orthodoxy (3.). Whereas converts have never made up the majority in the North American Orthodox Church, they are arguably its most vocal representatives, who have often introduced elements into the church that the traditional Orthodox consider alien and unsuitable, including 'Protestant' social forms. The final part (4.) elaborates on the more recent development of American internet Orthodoxy, that inscribes itself into an era which has witnessed the globalization of the culture wars (Goldberg 2014). This phenomenon introduces a new social dimension into the Orthodox Church in North America that may have detrimental effects on it in the long term.

2.   The globalization of the Orthodox Church – the Orthodox diaspora

The spread of Orthodox Christianity beyond its core regions in the Middle East and Eastern Europe since the end of the 19th century is primarily the result of geopolitical upheavals and migration waves, rather than missionary endeavors. While Christianity is per se a missionary religion, the Eastern Orthodox Church has always been less aggressive in its mission and therefore also less successful in terms of expansion. Instead of pro-actively traveling to the corners of the earth in order to turn people into Christians, Orthodox missions have been less visible, even though they were also quite successful, for example in the Eastern regions of the Russian Empire, as well as in Japan and Alaska (cf. Rimestad forthcoming). In the case of Alaska, which was a Russian colony before it was sold to the US in 1867, historians agree that the Russian Orthodox mission among the indigenous population was far more effective than the subsequent US Protestant attempts to evangelize the population (Kan 1999; Kan 2001). For many inhabitants, the Orthodox were perceived as peers, whereas the Protestants were foreign intruders who did not value their original culture.

Besides this arrival of Orthodox Christianity to America from the West via formerly Russian Alaska, it also, from the end of the 19th century, arrived from the East in the form of Balkan and Eastern European immigrants fleeing economic and political hardships. While most of these migrants identified as Greeks and came from either the newly formed Greek state or the Ottoman Empire, they were joined by a substantial number of Serbs, Romanians, and arrivals of various ethnicities from the Russian Empire (Durante 2015). These migrants brought with them a profoundly different kind of faith than that which had developed among the Alaskan indigenous population. In terms of social forms, though, both communities can be characterized as groups, held together by close-knit parish and family ties and often linked to a common ancestry of origin. However, the migrants were eager to integrate into the multicultural American society. They found themselves in a novel context in which the state did not involve itself in religious affairs, neither dictating the religious observance of its citizens nor (importantly) providing state support.

Moreover, ecclesiastical authorities in the regions from which they originally came were often at best uninterested in these *émigré* communities, forcing them to organize themselves independently of ecclesiastical oversight. This was further complicated in the Greek case, where the immigrants arrived from two distinct (and at times antagonistic) church jurisdictions, the Church of independent Greece and the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the Ottoman Empire. As a result, early migrant parishes were established independently, as private associations (often connected to a school in addition to a church) along the Protestant model (Kitroeff 2020). This engendered the social form of organization, but bottom-up and on a voluntary basis. Moreover, these organizations were not the main social form of the parishes, which functioned further as groups. They were necessary for the formal and legal existence of the parishes, which were the owners of the church (and school) buildings.

Meanwhile, the 'Russian' Orthodox in Alaska tried to uphold a traditional top-down episcopal church structure (dioceses), with bishops appointed by the church administration in Saint Petersburg. The diocese of Alaska was expanded to include all of the US soon after the Alaska Purchase (1867) and the bishop resided in San Francisco from 1872. His diocese was also an organization, but not congruent with the individual parishes, which remained groups and seldom had explicit organizational structures themselves. The buildings and legal obligations all lay in the hands of the diocese, which was a wholly different level from the lay faithful. It is therefore somewhat misleading to characterize the diocese as a social form. This element of Russian Orthodoxy

in the USA was greatly affected by the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, as it opened up the way for legal disputes regarding such ownership (Sarkisian 2019). Russian Orthodoxy in North America split into several antagonistic jurisdictions (organizations) as a result, one of which eventually became the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) in 1970.

The Russians, thus, tried to uphold a diocesan structure and administer the church top-down, while the Greeks established parishes from the bottom up, starting with an association and then contacting a bishop to appoint them a priest. These two *modi operandi* have remained prevalent in the North American Orthodox Church to this day. Whereas the bishops try to run the church as a corporation with a top-down structure, independent Orthodox communities and individuals periodically appear, looking for a bishop that may legitimize them in terms of church law. Moreover, there are auxiliary organizations in all Orthodox communities in the US that provide support for the poor, healthcare, or other issues of social welfare. While these tended to be located at the individual parish level in Greek parishes, the Russians often founded regional or diocesan organizations[1], but this difference is no longer constitutive.

The ethnically connoted jurisdictional plurality of the Orthodox Church in North America is considered an anomaly in the Orthodox world. In the traditionally Orthodox regions of the world, every bishop's jurisdiction is clearly delimited in geographical terms (Rimestad 2021: 87–91), but this is not the case outside of these regions. Because there is no universally recognized Orthodox Church responsible for North America, almost all nationally connoted church structures try to lay claims on "their" co-nationals on the continent. After the Greeks, numerous migrants from all traditionally Orthodox countries entered the US over the 20th century. Such migration happened especially following the great geopolitical catastrophes of the century, such as the Russian Revolution and the Greek-Turkish War in the wake of World War I as well as the recalibration of Europe following World War II. But the fall of the Iron Curtain 1989–1993 as well as the Yugoslav Wars and persecutions of Arab Christians have also increased the number of potential Orthodox Christian Americans, which is currently estimated between three and six million, or between 0.5 and 2 per cent of the population.

The US Religion Census 2020 found that the number of actual adherents to the Orthodox parishes had dropped from almost 800.000 in 2010 to about

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1   Cf. https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/c/1549/files/2019/08/Sarkisian-Analysis.pdf.

675.000 in 2020.[2] The vast majority of these are migrants from Orthodox cultures and their descendants. The absolutely largest Orthodox structure in the US is the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America (GOA) with 375.000 adherents, followed by the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese (AOCA), and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), each numbering between 60.000 and 75.000 adherents.

The OCA is a structure that was founded in 1970 as a church independent of any of the national Orthodox Churches (Tarasar 1975: 261–280). However, it was to a large extent a political project of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), meaning that it is still considered 'Russian' by many, even though it counts among the more 'American' jurisdictions. The traditional center of world Orthodoxy, the Patriarch of Constantinople, has not recognized it as an independent church so far, probably because it considers the GOA the most legitimate structure in North America. The AOCA was originally responsible for Arabic Orthodox Christians but has accepted a number of convert communities since the 1980s, making it too a multicultural entity.

There are eleven other church structures in the US that share the remaining 100.000 Orthodox adherents, including the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) with 24.000 adherents. This is a structure that was established in Serbia in the 1920s as an alternative to the compromised ROC in the Soviet Union (Rimestad 2015). It comprised most of the Russian bishops who fled from the Bolshevik regime and remained a staunchly monarchist and reactionary structure throughout the Cold War, considering itself the true Russian Orthodox Church. Its administrative center was relocated to Munich in 1945 and to New York in 1948. In 2007, through the mediation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, it reunited with its archenemy, the ROC of the Moscow Patriarchate (Collins 2023, 50–57). It still exists as a separate entity with a rather conservative outlook but has acknowledged the legitimacy of the Moscow Patriarchate as the center of Russian Orthodoxy.

This is a rather confusing plethora of separate structures, each of which may be seen as an organization in its own right. However, as was the case with

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2   Cf. https://orthodoxreality.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2020CensusGeneralRep ort1.pdf. There are additionally almost 500.000 Oriental Orthodox adherents in the US. This community has, despite being frequently conflated with the Eastern Orthodox, its own unique historical and sociological realities and so is beyond the scope of this paper.

the Russian diocese in the 19th century, these organizations are not primarily social forms in the sense of being arenas for social interaction, but rather providers of identity and umbrella organizations for the individual parishes that see themselves as communities for their members. The latter still correspond largely to the social form of 'group', where membership is informal and diffuse, but often tied to ethnic affiliation. At the same time, more formalized 'organizations' do exist, especially when it comes to the relationship with secular American society. There are church-linked social and cultural organizations, where there is formal membership and a hierarchical structure with clear division of labor. These organizations in most cases do not claim to represent 'the Church', however, but are auxiliary associations.

In other words, the social forms of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the US should be viewed at three different levels: the national level of dioceses and church structures (organization) is not really concerned with membership and social interaction, but mostly with church law and upholding geopolitical boundaries. The individual parishes (group), on the other hand, generally try to be inclusive but tend to become rather closed communities for people of a specific ethnic affiliation. The third level is outside of the church as such (organization/network) and includes church-affiliated organizations that labor for inclusive parishes, inter-jurisdictional cooperation, or social welfare programs. All three levels form part of the Orthodox Church in North America and make up its outward appearance. It would be a fallacy to see only one level, which would skew the image and misrepresent the complexity of US Orthodoxy.

3.   Conversion to Orthodox Christianity in the United States of America

One of the factors resulting in such a skewed perception is that of American converts to the Orthodox Church. Even though the vast majority of Orthodox Christians in the US have family ties to traditionally Orthodox countries and see themselves as Orthodox faithful "in the diaspora", the most vocal views of the Orthodox Church in the English language come from converts. While most converts have personal reasons for joining the Orthodox Church, such as Orthodox spouses or formative holiday encounters with Orthodox spirituality, there is a sizeable and very vocal type of convert who approaches the Orthodox Church from readings and profound theological or spiritual search (Rimestad

forthcoming; Medvedeva, forthcoming). Interestingly, such converts become very visible in the American religious field, since they are much more inclined to missionary activity than the Orthodox Church has traditionally been and often try to convince their peers of the Orthodox "truth" they have discovered. The social form thus championed is that of a group, but not in terms of social, linguistic, or ethnic proximity. Rather, the converts seek to idealize the religious aspects of Orthodoxy, downplaying its social aspects (Gallaher 2022).

One of the earliest examples of this type of convert was Seraphim Rose (1934–1982), a Californian academic who rejected Christianity as a youth and studied East Asian languages and culture before being accepted into the Orthodox Church (ROCOR) in 1962 (Christensen 1993). Six years after joining the Orthodox Church, Seraphim founded a monastery where he became a monk. He translated Orthodox theological writings into English and wrote his own theological texts, often in a rather polemical style, besides running an Orthodox publishing house and bookstore with a bi-monthly magazine. One of his main topics was the perceived depravity of Western society that could only be overcome through a rigorous adherence to Orthodox theological doctrine (ibid.). For Seraphim, secluded monasticism was the only social form that was fully compatible with Orthodox Christianity. He took an example from the Russian monastic saints of the 16th through 19th centuries, who also chose a life at the margins of civilization.

A different conversion story that also conforms to this type is that of Peter Gillquist (1938–2012), a leading member of the Evangelical Campus Crusades for Christ in the 1960s. Together with some of his fellow 'Crusaders', Gillquist became disillusioned with what he perceived as the superficiality of Protestant worship and church life and looked for the "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Christian Church" (1992: 57). He came across Eastern Orthodoxy, which he considered to embody this ideal community. Gillquist and his associates wished to retain the social form they had grown into during their search for religious truth – that of a close-knit "community of fate" – but the wish to be accepted into the Orthodox Church as a group was initially not granted by any Orthodox bishop in the US. The bishops feared that the balance between the three levels of social forms described in the previous section would suffer from such a group conversion of theologically literate and, perhaps more importantly, culturally Protestant Americans. If these Protestant Americans entered into their jurisdictions, their cultural (and one could say, ethnic) character would suffer. Considering the churches had functioned not just as centers of worship but of community life, this was a reasonable fear.

Nevertheless, the Gillquist group was finally accepted by AOCA bishop (Metropolitan) Philip in 1987, who saw these conversions as a way to provide additional visibility to his fledgling church of Arabic migrants (Herbel 2014: 103–129). The group was known as the Evangelical Orthodox Mission, an organization modeled on Protestant missionary outreach, and it grew rapidly, from 17 to 32 parishes within six years (Gillquist 1992: 175–177). Moreover, the Mission established a publishing house (Ancient Faith Publishing), which has published numerous volumes and other texts praising the AOCA as a generous haven for American converts, even though these publications have been criticized as being a "strange hybrid of evangelical Protestantism and Orthodoxy" (Gallaher 2022: 115).

For Gillquist, as well as for innumerable others, the Orthodox Church offered a place for unadulterated spirituality, a refuge from rampant secularization and liberalism (cf. Makrides 2022). At the same time, their Western, Protestant mindset made it difficult for them to imagine a religious faith where the social form of organization does not take a prime place. Instead of blending into the existing social forms of jurisdictions (organizations) and parishes (groups), the converts tend to establish parish organizations and evade obedience to traditional authority structures (cf. Gallaher 2022). This can also be seen in the rising popularity of published conversion accounts to Orthodox Christianity on the American book market in the last years (such as Gillquist 1995; Huneycutt 2018; cf. also Medvedeva forthcoming), not to mention the establishments of other media outlets, such as the radio station "Ancient Faith Radio"[3] or interactive websites, like "journeytoorthodoxy.com" and others. Common to them all is the attempt to portray Orthodox Christianity as *original* Christianity, and thus the solution to many of the problems of the modern world.

Ksenia Medvedeva (forthcoming) argues that American converts to the Orthodox Church either convert "to the Ancient Church" or they convert "against Western values". We argue that there is no substantial difference between these two motives, but rather between what may be called *theological* and *cultural* converts. *Cultural converts* are those who convert because of personal reasons or af-

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3   Rebranded as "Ancient Faith Ministries" in the digital era. Ancient Faith Ministries demonstrates the particular nature of these "theological converts" and the extent to which they retain their (white) American Protestant cultural perspective, seeking to create "Orthodox" alternatives to the cultural components of American Evangelical Protestantism.

ter a profound spiritual experience involving the Orthodox Church. They are generally happy to try to integrate into existing parishes, even if these retain an ethnic character. The *theological converts*, on the other hand, who see in Orthodoxy "the true church", feel distracted by the ethnic character. These latter, like Peter Gillquist and his community, may then try to establish their own Orthodox parishes, where ethnicity is not a significant marker (Gillquist 1992: 182–184; Slagle 2011: 124–142). As mentioned above, this is most easily achieved in the OCA and the AOCA, church structures that try to leave their ethnic connotations behind. That is why these two structures are the ones that tend to be most open to receiving converts and integrating fully into American culture. In terms of social forms, this means that their parishes conceive of themselves as "movements", rather than groups, in the sense that their membership is even more diffuse and informal with a high degree of symbolic integration and a clearly stated goal: to make society more Orthodox.

However, this goal is a two-pronged sword, for it can mean either of two things. For one, some converts long for a return to the "golden age" of Orthodox Christianity, which is variably situated in the time of the Church Fathers in the first Millennium CE or in the Tsarist Russian Empire, as we elaborate in the next section. The other option is more benign, a diffusion of Orthodox spirituality and Christian love into all aspects of societal life, by leading the way as positive examples. For some proponents of the first idea, the converts arguing for the second option have already lost contact with the true Orthodox faith and have succumbed to liberalism and secularization. For those in the second group, it is the other way around: the converts that long for an 'orthodoxization' of society conflate the abstract Orthodox ethos with rigorous practices and rules (Gallaher 2022).

The proponents of an 'orthodoxization' of American society want the Orthodox Church to take on the social form of a movement, which would consciously and radically counter what they perceive as harmful secularizing and liberal developments. Analytically, it is difficult to describe them as a movement, but they are rather part of a network of political and social ideas that are shared across communities and religions. They often refer to the polemic works of Seraphim Rose, which would champion 'traditional Orthodox anti-Westernism'. However, according to Robert Saler (2024), Seraphim's actual theology was not so much anti-Western as it provided a template on which anti-Westernism can easily be crafted (cf. also Riccardi-Swartz 2022: 191). The radical anti-Westernism of Orthodox Christianity is a recent phenomenon, even if it has precursors in earlier centuries (Makrides/Uffelmann 2003).

At the same time, immigrant American Orthodoxy has not been entirely immune from the effects of this mentality, absorbing it both from the converts entering Orthodoxy and from the wider culture, a culture in which religion has increasingly become a marker of political identity (Hartman 2019). The most visible example of this phenomenon is the rise of the so-called Ephraimite monasteries in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (Kostarelos 2020; Kostarelos 2022). The charismatic Elder Ephraim (1928–2019), born in Volos, Greece, and trained as an Athonite monk under the influential Joseph the Hesychast, visited North America in the late 1970s. Here, he found a Greek community in its second and third-generation post-migration that was increasingly affluent and highly assimilated.[4] Ephraim understood this as a lack of spiritual vigor on the part of the Greeks and thus resolved to come to the United States as a missionary to this Orthodox Christian community. Thus, like many American converts to Orthodoxy, Ephraim understood Orthodoxy in a much more mission-focused way than it had previously understood itself. The difference, however, is that Ephraim understood his mission primarily to the Greek diaspora, which had fallen away from their traditional Orthodox faith, not to those from other ethnic backgrounds. Despite this original focus of his mission on the Greek American community, the monasteries founded by Ephraim and his followers have also attracted a considerable number of converts, eager for the experience of 'authentic' Athonite monasticism in America (Kelaidis forthcoming). The existence of Ephraimite monasteries demonstrates the way in which Western Christian social forms have influenced Orthodox Christian understandings in the diaspora leading to the generation of para-ecclesiastical bodies under the guise of religious organizations.

4.   Orthodox catechization and the internet

Sarah Riccardi-Swartz (2022) conducted fieldwork over an extended period among Orthodox Christians in a small town in the Appalachian mountains. Her findings corroborate the change occurring since 2010 and especially since the ascent of Donald Trump to the American presidency in 2016. Whereas the Orthodox community she studied initially grew out of the vision of a disciple of Seraphim Rose in 2000, it has increasingly become a home for converts who are disillusioned with current American politics and look for alternative

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4   Cf. https://ergon.scienzine.com/article/articles/liturgical-language-crisis-of-1970.

concepts of community. This way, the Orthodox faith becomes reimagined in a way that is deeply tied to the political. This imagined world "marshals theological and political structures far removed from ancient Christian monasticism and American religion and politics, yet continually in tension with both" (ibid.: 192).

Besides this political radicalization of Orthodox communities in rural America, there is a much more dangerous radicalization that is happening online. The proliferation of internet resources and digital communication has profoundly changed the social forms of Orthodox Christianity in America. Coupled with an increasingly polarized and dichotomized political atmosphere in the US, this gave rise to the phenomenon of reactive internet Orthodoxy. Digital Orthodox celebrities, such as Josiah Trenham, Rod Dreher, Peter Heers, and Frederica Mathewes-Green, "were all players in the social drama of Reactive Orthodoxy" (ibid.: 21). These actors not only are all converts from Evangelical Protestant Churches to Orthodox Christianity, but they use internet technologies to very vocally lay the claim of representing 'true' Orthodox spirituality. At the same time, they have retained a Protestant mindset that hinders them in fully accepting universally held Orthodox truths, such as the subordination to one's bishop or the importance of community (Gallaher 2022). Although there are various parallel Orthodox ecclesiastical structures in North America that have a partially strained relationship with each other, they all agree that it is usurpation when a priest like Peter Heers is unable to disclose which bishop is blessing his work as a priest.[5]

Nevertheless, this does not diminish Heers' appeal to disillusioned Americans who find these online offerings of Orthodox faith so appealing that they decide to convert and become avid followers. Even those who are rooted in an Orthodox parish community tend to utilize online resources. For many of these converts, according to Riccardi-Swartz, "digital networks allowed them to connect, share, and be a part of the broader Orthodox community across the globe" (Riccardi-Swartz 2022: 188; cf. also Medvedeva forthcoming). While the actual discussions in Orthodox communities and the printed literature retain some level of theological nuance and differentiation, online communications tend to be more polarized and full of inflammatory rhetoric.

In terms of social forms, the actual parishes and living Orthodox communities, be they predominantly ethnic or converts, retain the characteristics of a group, focusing on the individuals as part of the community (Bringerud 2019).

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5   Cf. https://www.assemblyofbishops.org/news/2023/communique-04202023.

The online communities, on the other hand, perceive themselves as a move-
ment that aims at preventing further social change in the liberal direction.
However, they are more concisely conceptualized as networks, since they do
not rely on locations or physical interaction but only serve as echo chambers
mutually reinforcing mostly far-right political opinions through specific theo-
logical interpretations that are often not condoned by the official religious ex-
perts of the Orthodox Church.[6]

A significant number of the recent converts to online reactive Orthodoxy in
North America have little contact with an actual Orthodox parish since there is
none in their vicinity. Furthermore, many of these converts are already part
of social groups particularly prone to engagement with online radicalism –
namely young men who have at least some higher education and experience
some degree of alienation from society and/or peer groups (Odag et al. 2019).
In keeping with their broader alienation, their exposure to everyday parish life
in the Orthodox Church is minimal, to such an extent that the social form they
are living in the Orthodox Church resembles a dyad, where the individual con-
vert interacts with the church through a few self-styled internet gurus.[7] That
many of these converts embrace the label "incel" (originally denoting involun-
tary celibate young males) further exacerbates their radicalization, as they are
"outraged by the shifting social norms in the United States, fearful of potential
political and religious persecution of American conservative Christians, and
concerned by threats to white hegemony" (Riccardi-Swartz 2022: 188). It be-
comes increasingly clear that there is a growing subculture within the Ortho-
dox Church in North America that politically leans to the right fringes while
it increasingly disconnects with traditional authorities and social forms in the
Orthodox Church, the bishops and the parishes as moderating communities
(Gallaher 2022). This subculture thrives in the era of "networked individual-
ism", as identified by Rainie and Wellman (2012). The more detrimental ef-
fects of the "Triple Revolution" they hold high have arguably become plainly
visible only since the mid-2010s, in the "Putin-Trump era" that saw the rise
of White Nationalism in the US, the eruption of inter-racial violence and the
Black Lives Matter-Movement, and also the COVID-19 pandemic and rampant
Trumpism (Riccardi-Swartz 2022: 187). That there is a direct link between far-
right rhetoric and conversion to Orthodox Christianity is undeniable, both in
terms of white nationalism (Leonova 2019) and anti-vaccinationism (Issaris et

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6   Cf. e.g. https://theopenark.substack.com/p/from-orthobro-to-orthodox-and-the.
7   Cf. https://theopenark.substack.com/p/from-orthobro-to-orthodox-and-the.

al. 2023). When the dispute over the presidential elections of 2020 provoked the "Storm on the Capitol" on January 6, 2021, there were numerous Orthodox converts among the rioters, including at least one priest, who was later sanctioned by his bishop for his actions.[8] This radicalization is undoubtedly a result of the triple revolution, with the additional revolution in AI and algorithms, which help solidify the feeling of being part of a moral majority, even if this feeling has little basis in reality.

The fact that physical interaction as a diverse community is not necessary to spread some of these political and social views becomes a problem for the Orthodox parishes in North America. There is a tension between the traditional emphasis among the Orthodox church structures in the USA and this new English-language Orthodox discourse on the internet. The former has focused on finding a way to make Orthodox Christianity American and universal by overcoming ethnic divisions, a topic that has remained an important part of the rhetoric of converts like Gillquist and is still held high by the Orthodox Churches in the US. The other discourse, which Riccardi-Swartz terms "Reactive Orthodoxy", is a discourse happening primarily online since the mid-2010s that is seeping into convert Orthodox communities. It is a "worldbuilding form of the faith that finds its roots in an imagined nostalgia for ancient Rus', American Christian nationalism, and an apocalyptic disenchantment with democracy" (Riccardi-Swartz 2022: 173).

Instead of readily accepting the social form of the Orthodox parishes that can be conceptualized as a local group and focuses on the individual members, reactive Orthodoxy sees itself as a movement with a clear goal – to overthrow the liberal bias of contemporary American society, be it gender ideologies, infringements upon civil liberties, or race relations. At the same time, it is analytically more correct to describe reactive Orthodoxy as a network in the sense of Rainie and Wellman, as a community held together through digital links, often centering on a few controversial but media-savvy experts. Some of these experts, moreover, are more interested in followers and internet fame than in consistent theological arguments.[9]

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8   Cf. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/08/22/orthodox-priest-jan-6-participant-supports-russian-government-scheme-enticing-conservatives.

9   Cf. https://theopenark.substack.com/p/from-orthobro-to-orthodox-and-the; https://www.euronews.com/2023/07/31/democracy-is-a-tool-of-satan-the-murky-world-of-orthodox-influencers.

5.   Conclusion

What all this means for the social forms of Orthodox Christianity in North America is that there is a rising tension between the *communitizing* elements that have dominated American Orthodox discourse until recently and the *societalizing* tendencies of reactionary online Orthodoxy. Communitization for the Orthodox communities in the US means growing together to be a harmonious community of believers, which would overcome traditional and existing ethnic and cultural divisions, including with regard to mainstream society. The societalizing tendencies, on the other hand, refer to abstract and functional links between like-minded individuals who are more interested in constructing an alternative to the mainstream than growing as a community. The Orthodox Church has never been fond of the idea of the church as an organization, even though the various jurisdictions operating in North America have organizational structures. These are much more concerned with authority structures and church law than with their actual members, though. Although Orthodox parishes in the US had to register as organizations for legal reasons, most early parishes were relatively homogeneous groups of individual faithful that recognized each other as equal without any formal membership requirements. That being said, not infrequently throughout the twentieth century, Greek Orthodox parishes, for example, developed along regional lines or split from one another as political tensions in Greece found their way to the diaspora (Diamanti-Karanou 2015).[10]

Nevertheless, the conceptualization of the Orthodox Church as a movement of like-minded people of the same faith, though dispersed among various contesting ethnic structures, was prevalent, including the attempts to establish a non-ethnic American Orthodoxy – be they through inter-jurisdictional cooperation or convert communities (Bringerud 2019). This is clearly a communitizing impetus, looking to integrate diverse individuals into a united faith community. Orthodox religious organizations below the level of the jurisdiction do exist, but they are not coterminous with the parish. They help organize specific parts of its Orthodox outreach, such as support for the needy (Riccardi-Swartz 2022: 152–153) or inter-Orthodox cooperation (Kishkovsky 2004). Moreover, this work is usually perceived as the fulfillment of Christian obligations rather than as a function within an organization. For the individual parish,

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10   The tensions in America's growing Ethiopian Orthodox community seem to repeat this kind of development in the 21st century (Kelaidis, forthcoming).

the social form of a group is more apt, since it has a fluid, diffuse membership, where all those present are integrated into the community as individual faithful.

Reactive online Orthodoxy, on the other hand, while also perceiving itself as a movement with a moral impetus, is best described with the social form of a network. More precisely, it is a digital network, one that in some cases borders on the dyadic, meaning the relationship between a central actor and their individual followers. As such, it does not display the same community elements, but can rather be viewed as a political entity. The community is virtual and only occasionally becomes visible, most often in the term of events. Brandon Gallaher mentions several events at various North American Orthodox clergy seminaries over the last few years that have included speakers who are celebrities within reactive online Orthodoxy (Gallaher 2022: 112–113; cf. also Riccardi-Swartz 2022: 21). He laments a general trend for all these seminaries to succumb to ultra-conservative agenda-setting and fundamentalist rhetoric in their public events.

Most Orthodox believers in the US still congregate in communities, but it is increasingly difficult to avoid the discourse of reactive online Orthodoxy because it is omnipresent on the internet. Moreover, it is a self-reinforcing spiral in that even well-meaning reposts of seemingly harmless Orthodox content very easily attract comments from the reactive Orthodox milieu. This is the result of both the veil of anonymity that is offered by the internet and the mission impetus of reactive Orthodoxy. Seeing themselves as saviors of a fallen world, these actors, who are mostly converts from Protestantism, display online communication that is lecturing and polemical. Thus, the ideas circulating among reactive online Orthodox do take hold also in the parishes, especially those that have a large percentage of converts. This implies that these parishes might become more closed and dismissive of diversity of opinion. The dream of diverse and all-encompassing Orthodoxy that is harbored among many liberal Orthodox in North America is hampered by this development.

However, this development is not specific to North America, though reactive online Orthodoxy still is a predominantly American phenomenon. Because it is conducted mainly in English, however, it has a global following. At the same time, it is fueled also by the deliberate use of Russian propaganda, especially following the attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Attempts to openly split public opinion, mainly originating from Russia, can also be seen in many European contexts, although the use of Orthodox Christianity to this end has not been as successful as in the US.

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