Regina Elsner, *Die Russische Orthodoxe Kirche vor der Herausforderung Moderne* [The Russian Orthodox Church Facing the Challenge of Modernity]

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The relations between Orthodox Christianity and modernity have been amply discussed in recent decades, based on the various experiences of local Orthodox Churches and cultures. If we were to find a more or less common denominator in these studies, it would be that Orthodoxy's encounter with modernity has been less fruitful than it could potentially have been. There are many reasons for this. Simply the fact that modernity was the outcome of tremendous multi-layered transformations in Western Europe suffices as an explanation. This area was historically dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, whereas the rise of modernity went hand in hand, *inter alia*, with the outbreak of the Reformation and the concomitant sweeping change of the (religious) landscape there. Truth be told, Western Christianity (especially Roman Catholicism) was most seriously and painfully challenged by modernity, yet despite losses it managed to align itself with it critically and productively in the long run. Due to the religious and other estrangement between East and West in the Middle Ages and later, the Orthodox, for their part, came to view with suspicion everything that had originated from Western Europe, religious or not. This may also explain the Orthodox distrust towards modernity as a Western product. It is about the Orthodox anti-Westernism as a pervasive orientation that has shaped Orthodox cultures across centuries and still lingers on today in various forms. This notwithstanding, there have been numerous individual productive encounters across history between Orthodoxy and modernity, attesting to the fact that this possibility does exist, a promising sign for the future. This is because even though modernity as such has been subjected to serious criticism in recent decades from many sides (e.g., post-modern, post-secular, post-colonial), it is still a topic religions unavoidably have to come to terms with.

In light of these preliminary considerations, it is not amiss to argue that the Russian Orthodox Church takes a lion's share in the Orthodoxy-modernity encounter. This is a topic variously and intensively examined in post-communist times. This holds also true for Regina Elsner's monograph, which is an appropriate combination of historical material with a theological evaluation—all related to the specifically Russian Orthodox experience with modernity. Elsner is aware of the current situation in post-Soviet times when the Russian Church officially appears to criticize core modern values (e.g., individualization, rationalization, secularization); thus her overarching intent is to shed light on this complex issue by looking at its long prehistory. After the introduction, in the second part (pp. 23–182), she tries to reconstruct seven important historical moments in the encounter between Orthodoxy and modernity: the crisis of tradition at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, including the debates between the "possessor" and "non-possessor" monastic movements, which led to serious discussions about church-state relations and internal church

changes; the church reforms of Patriarch Nikon in the 17th century and their consequences; the radical church reform of Tsar Peter I in the 18th century as a modernization process according to Western models; the philosophical, theological, and cultural fermentations of the 19th century concerning Russia's religious and cultural identity; the fascinating church reform attempts at the beginning of the 20th century including the All-Russian Church Council of 1917-18; the challenge of atheism in the Soviet Union and the flourishing of the Russian Orthodox diaspora in the West; and the situation in post-communist times with the church challenged by the sudden transition to a liberal and pluralistic global environment. Throughout these encounters with modernity one may identify various consistent lines of Orthodox argumentation, such as endorsing traditionalism and viewing innovation/change as a threat; supporting the intertwining of the church with the autocratic state; conceptualizing a special position for the church in the world and especially vis-à-vis secularity; and perceiving the West collectively as a danger. Elsner's main goal here is to understand how these historical stages have impacted the Russian Church as a whole and how they shaped its argumentation and discourse vis-à-vis modernity.

In the third part (pp. 183–294), consequently, she proceeds to examine the Russian theological analysis of such modern developments and tries to unravel its background and motivation. To this purpose, she put particular emphasis on the important Orthodox notions of unity and wholeness (cf. that of *sobornost'*), which play a pivotal role in Trinitarian theology, anthropology, and ecclesiology. Needless to say, such integrative and holistic Orthodox orientations have practical consequences for the church's positioning in the world. But more importantly, they fundamentally deviate from the notions of differentiation, fragmentation, plurality, and diversity that have accompanied the Western project of modernity. This is a crucial point that may offer clues as to whether Russian Orthodoxy is potentially compatible with modernity in its various articulations. This question should not be necessarily answered negatively. No doubt, there is a clear preference for an integral worldview sustained by the above Orthodox theological notions. However, the same may also support openness and respect for multiplicity and otherness, as recent theological discourses postulating a necessary equilibrium between unity and diversity have argued. In the end as always, it is a matter of interpretation.

In a fourth part (pp. 295–344), Elsner focuses on selected theological positions of the Russian Church towards current challenges in the 21st century (e.g., democratization, liberal values, globalization), which make it clear that the tensions between the Orthodox concept of unity and the modern ideal of diversity have not disappeared. Yet, aside from official church positions, which are often due to the church's socio-political entanglements, there is a manifold Orthodox theological potential for accommodating the present pluralist environment. This may take place especially in the context of post-modernity, as the author summarizes in conclusion (pp. 345–352); for instance, through apophaticism, non-verbal media of communication, and non-rational means of apprehending the world—all elements particularly cherished in the Orthodox tradition.

All in all, it is an erudite and very useful book that situates the whole topic on a broad historical and theological canvas. Such a theological focus is absolutely necessary, as it concerns subtle points and differences that usually remain outside the scope of social scientific and other examinations of modernity. As a result, this book nicely complements other approaches to the same topic from the social, political, and cultural sciences (cf. Andreas Buss, *The Russian-Orthodox Tradition and Modernity*, Leiden: Brill, 2003; Kristina Stoeckl, *Community after Totalitarianism: The*

Russian Orthodox Intellectual Tradition and the Philosophical Discourse of Political Modernity, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008).

Let me turn now to some final remarks:

First, the Russian Orthodox encounter with Western modernity was – historically speaking – more intense and more systematic than that of the other Orthodox Churches. In fact, over time Russian Orthodox thought had already had closer engagements with various facets of modernity with significant results, despite ambiguous moments. For instance, in the 18th century there were both systematic reflection on and action towards necessary church reforms in a modern context. The international establishment of a specifically Russian religious philosophy from the 19th century onwards, with numerous representatives, is another case in point. Russian academic theology up to 1917 also created various bridges to modernity. The All-Russian Church Council of 1917-18 was a further step in reforming the church in the context of modernity. Finally, the post-1917 Russian theological and philosophical emigration to the West was a seminal occurrence that fostered the multifaceted dialogue between Orthodoxy and modernity. It concerns developments, discussed in Elsner's book, that were of lasting, if not paradigmatic, significance for the rest of the Orthodox world. It is also not accidental that the controversial discourse about "Sophiology", aimed at bringing the church and the world closer, was developed mainly within Russian Orthodoxy and not in other local Orthodox contexts (e.g., Greek). Thus, the pioneer role played by the Russian Orthodox in this key domain deserves pan-Orthodox praise and recognition, despite later criticism.

Second, as in every particular local Orthodox tradition, there are obvious specificities in the Russian Orthodox encounter with modernity, and these help us understand the current situation. In fact, the Russian Orthodox Church has been often disapproved for its critical stance towards various modern values and its defense of the so-called "traditional" ones. This is plainly clear in Elsner's book. Yet, aside from lingering Orthodox anti-Westernism, one has to take into consideration the multiple vicissitudes of recent Russian history in order to better capture current developments. In other words, having experienced in its own body Soviet atheistic secularism, one cannot expect the Russian Church in post-communist times to fully endorse Western secularity. In fact, there have been several simplistic expectations (especially in the 1990s) that post-Soviet Russia would liberalize itself in a Western sense, which have proven wrong. Hence, today's overall Russian Orthodox discontent with the Western project of modernity is a timely reminder of the many particularities of the Russian scene, religious, cultural, or otherwise.

Third, talking about the Russian Orthodox dealing with modernity leads to the question of the potential pan-Orthodox scope of this endeavor. In fact, just as there is much talk today about "multiple modernities," there are also "multiple Orthodoxies," and their encounters with or positions towards modernity are far from identical. This is not problematic as such, as local Orthodox plurality and diversity do not (and should not) necessarily impinge upon pan-Orthodox unity, which is not understood as uniformity. However, this situation is a double-edged sword, especially if local variations unleash centrifugal rather than centripetal forces within the wider Orthodox world. This seems to be the case with the issue under discussion, considering that Russian Orthodox positions on modernity appear to deviate significantly from those of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This becomes obvious if one compares, on the one hand, the "Bases of the Social Concept" (2000) and the "Bases of the Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and

Rights" (2008) of the Russian Orthodox Church, with the recent social document "For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church" (2020) of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Thus, a potential pan-Orthodox convergence on the evaluation of modernity remains not only a desideratum and an imperative, but also a major challenge for the Orthodox world in the future.

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