Kristina Stoeckl

The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights.

London and New York: Routledge, 2014. 158 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-65871-3 (hardback) £95.00.

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During the last decade, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) debates on religion and human rights have shown a major conceptual shift in the understanding of human rights in Christian political theology, social doctrine, and internal/external Church politics. The preparation of new documents by the ROC in 2000-2008, related to the understanding and interpretation of human rights, revealed a fresh stage of negotiations between religion, politics, and society after the Eastern Europe political sphere's transformation over the last two decades. Given the novelty of the debate shift, the number of scholarly publications on this topic remains insufficient both within the Russian-speaking and international communities. Kristina Stoeckl's book is an important contribution to the developing field of research on religion and human rights in Eastern Europe.

In her recent monograph *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*, published in the Routledge series *Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States*, K. Stoeckl presents a thorough and well-structured analysis of human rights debates within the ROC. She likewise explores the debates' impact internally within Russia, externally (for the wider Russian society), and globally. The book does not focus so much on the analysis of internal church debates, but on the interactions between Church and state and Church and society, around the human rights agenda. The author points out that historical models of Church-state relations matter in this debate. However, the reduction of the analysis to the path-dependency theoretical approach is not the only way of reasoning. The book's main topics include the Church's discourse on human rights; its claims and the language of human rights debates; the Church's actions; and its experience of participation in public discussions on human rights. The author reconstructs the historical perspective, intertwined with the current debates, and questions whether we can talk about the repercussions of the past or whether we are facing a new situation in modern international politics.

The analysis of the human rights debates, as carried out in the book, implies a Western theoretical discourse and vocabulary. Stoeckl introduces the secular/post-secular debate of Taylor and Habermas as an analytical tool for this analysis. Yet, according to the book's preface, the author stands in a critical position to the theory of post-secularization. She argues that "even when a conservative religious tradition like Russian Orthodoxy engages in the work of 'translation', what it renders understandable to a secular audience is far from reconcilable with liberal democracy" (p. VIII). The author develops this argument along with her explication of the history of the human rights discussion and its application to human rights issues by the ROC. Emphasizing that "the Russian Orthodox standpoint on human rights has not yet been spoken and that this book is therefore only the signpost along the way" (p. VIII), the author demonstrates a multi-faceted analysis of the ROC's attitudes toward human rights and human dignity from the Cold War period onward, including the arguments about the shift of the discourse.

In the book's introduction, Stoeckl examines the relationship between religion and human rights, uncovering the possibilities for dialog/tension between them. She demonstrates that ideological contradistinctions between religion and human rights, and the suspicion of human

rights from a religious perspective (per the analysis of Henkin's approach) are less productive than the idea of the "sacralization of the person", which was recently introduced by Joas. This idea is not reducible either to the religious or to the secular intellectual tradition. Stoeckl presents it as "potentially more fruitful for structuring the debate on religion and human rights" (p. 5), since it opens up the horizon for further discussion and eliminates the tensions around the question of the origin of human rights, between the religious and secular perspectives.

The distinction of the dialog/tensions approach is followed by a descriptive history of the ROC's engagement with the human rights agenda, as presented in the *Chapter I: Four areas of encounters and friction with human rights for the Russian Orthodox Church*. Stoeckl's description articulates the paradoxical situations and twofold motives of Church politics, depending on the internal/external interests and functions in the system of domestic and international relations (p. 23). She describes the ambiguity of the Church leaders' public statements, starting from the interview with patriarchal *locum tenens* Sergii, who denied the persecution of religious freedoms in the USSR in the 1930s, the fear of repression, internal Church politics related to the appearance of autocephalous Churches, which the ROC intended to bring back under its own jurisdiction, emphasizing peace, and ignoring religious freedoms. Stoeckl introduces all these historical facts in order to reveal the process of the instrumentalisation of human rights debates until the 1990s. The author interprets the clash between the positions of Orthodox believers and the official Church statements as a result of that process, which escalated the confrontation between religious freedom and international legal standards. Using historical examples from the era between the Cold war and the 1990s, Stoeckl clearly demonstrates why the Church engaged with human rights topics in the particular way that it did. Based on the analysis of legal documents (the *Law on Religious Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations*); on the establishment of the World Russian People's Council in 1993; and on cases taken to the European Court on Human rights that were related to religious freedom and the ROC, the author offers evidence that this period created the preconditions for the strengthening of the confrontational discourse on human rights in the ROC.

In the next three chapters, together with a discourse analysis of the official documents on human rights agenda published by the World Russian People's Council in 2006 and the ROC in 2008, the author introduces and develops the central argument of the book. Her argument states that a shift in the confrontation discourse has happened: "the scenario of the 'clash of civilizations' is changing … to a confrontation between a secular-liberal-individualistic ideology and a religious-communitarian and traditionalist worldview" (p. 49). This shift, with its various implications for internal and external Church policy, has been denoted by the author as "the double strategy": traditional and conservative in its international relations, while carrying out a "polemical confrontation with secular … and liberal Russian civil society in the domestic sphere" (p. 95). Applying the institutional analysis to the Moscow Patriarchate division, namely to the Department for the External Church Relations, from 2000-2008, Stoeckl demonstrates the differentiation of the positions of the Church clergy and its believers, as well as the formation of three factions: liberals, fundamentalists, and traditionalists. (These three factions take the place of two previously existing groups: liberals and conservatives) (p. 42).

The author ends the book with an appeal to the Orthodox theology: "it is there - in theology - where the future trajectory of the encounter of Orthodoxy and modernity is being mapped out" (p. 131). Together with suggesting a self-minorization, on the part of the ROC, from its status as a majority religion in Russia, the author also proposes the application of the theoretical frames of Taylor's idea of "mutual fragilization". She argues that the ROC's history of confrontation with human rights is in fact a mutual request for an "encounter that unsettles each of the actors involved through the process of self-reflectivity" (p. 130).

The author provides a careful interpretation of ROC's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights (2008) and its comparison with the earlier similar document issued by the World Russian People's Council (2006). She also emphasizes that there is a distinction between the concepts of human worth and human dignity in the 2006 document, which has been corrected but still remains ambiguous in the 2008 document (p. 72). This statement could be questioned; it is not necessarily obvious that the distinction between universal dignity (inherited) and acquired dignity (moral dignity, in the 2008 document) should disappear. In her following argumentation on the moral aspects of human dignity, as introduced in the Basic Teaching, Stoeckl says that, for "ordinary Russians and Orthodox believers" (p. 73), there is a distinction between the concepts of *moral* and *nravstvennost'*. She adds that these semantic differences could be related to the change of the Church discourse "over the last few years since the publication of the Doctrine", in that the Church provides rules for the moral public discourse while the "inner-outer duality contained in the word morality/*nravstvennost'* is lost" (p. 74). This remark brings our attention to the necessity that further conceptualization work be carried out, regarding the public language and discourse of the newly published Church documents, to render the semantic oppositions less glaring.

It must be stressed that Stoeckl brings a novel, engaging and constructive approach to her research on the ROC and human rights debate, as well as to developing the instrument and the language for interdisciplinary research in a context where there has been, up to now, only limited theological and socio-political study. She successfully demonstrates how the analysis of Eastern European public debates and discourse could benefit from the implementation and development of a Western social sciences and humanities framework. Along with this, Stoeckl discovers the aspects of J. Habermas' post-secularism theory that have the potential to be developed further. Together with introducing the ROC debate on human rights into broader Orthodox theological discussions (in particular, theological arguments from Greek Orthodox thought), the author presents a balanced and well-argued position on the highly politicized topic of Church engagement around the human rights agenda.

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