

**Being Orthodox in the Academy: Does it Matter? Should it Matter?
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Abstract

A group of Orthodox scholars working in various disciplines in higher education in a one-day meeting to begin to explore, to investigate, and to discuss the interaction of Orthodox Christianity – as personal faith, as Church, and as body of knowledge – with American higher education. The questions “Should it matter?” and “Does it matter?” provide a general framework for engaging Orthodox Christian particularity with the scholarly pursuits of research and teaching and mentoring students. The meeting will be part of the Annual Meeting of the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA), June 12-14, 2008.

Project Description

No one knows with certainty the number of Orthodox Christians working in American higher education as administrators, professors, or researchers. A directory published by the Consulate of the Republic of Greece in Boston listed hundreds of scholars only of *Greek* nationality or ancestry. The connection between Greek ethnicity and Orthodox adherence may be assumed in the majority of those listed in such a directory, but not 100%. By design, the directory did not include those from other ethnic Orthodox backgrounds, nor did it include those who have converted to Orthodox Christianity.

It is also becoming apparent that the number of Orthodox Christian scholars in theological disciplines working in religious studies programs and theological schools outside the Orthodox theological schools in the United States has risen significantly. For example, when the Orthodox Theological Society in America was founded over forty years ago, the faculties of the three Orthodox theological schools in the U.S. (Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological School, and St. Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological School) dominated the membership (of about 30). Today, OTSA has grown (to about 150), with the vast majority of its members teach outside of these three seminaries. In Chicago, for example, the membership of St. Catherine’s Institute, a newly formed group of 25-30 Orthodox Christian scholars, is

composed of those mostly in theologically related disciplines, but also includes other disciplines.

American higher education has had a checkered history absorbing religious minorities. For example, in *Religious Literacy*, Stephen Prothero (2007) explains that because elementary and secondary schools were vigorously anti-Roman Catholic in the mid-nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church began establishing parish schools in earnest. This extended into higher education as well. The Roman Catholic Church began establishing Roman Catholic colleges in the U.S. because students were not accepted into colleges and universities with Reformation backgrounds. Boston College is an example of a university with such a founding story. While Orthodox Christians may have faced discrimination upon their arrival in the early twentieth century, they quickly worked their way into the American melting pot through public education and the academy. The motivation for establishing parochial schools and other programs, in particular by Greek Orthodox, was to preserve language and cultural identity, in the face of the melting pot.

In today's religiously based institutions of higher education, there is a renewed discussion on the relationship between faith and learning. The discussion appears to have many possible causes: the rise of the Christian Right in the last two decades, the increased role and presence of religious faith in the wider American culture, and the increasing presence of Islam and non-Abrahamic religions in the United States as discussed in Eck's Pluralism Project. In addition, as a response to concerns from the Vatican, Roman Catholic universities have engaged the question of their "Catholic identity." Finally, the Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation of the Lilly Endowment has begun to influence the conversation as well. Prothero (2007) points out that today, "a countervailing impulse now seems to be at play – a recovery of particularity in both academia and American culture writ large."

To our knowledge, there has not been any sustained reflection on the presence of Orthodox Christians in higher education in the United States and the question of "Orthodox particularity" in this milieu. Again there may be a number of reasons, but two come to mind. First, since most Orthodox have not faced outright discrimination, there is a general acceptance of Orthodox Christians in the academy – we are different but not that different. Second, the Orthodox Churches in America have had a relatively short history of establishing institutions of undergraduate higher education, being content with theological education for clerical preparation. Hellenic College, founded in 1968, is the still extant undergraduate institution, albeit with a "roller coaster experience" of expansion and contraction. There have been other attempts as well: the short-lived Rose Hill College (Aiken, SC) and a relationship between St. Vladimir's Seminary and Iona College.

The Orthodox Theological Society in America wishes to explore the potential impact, if any, of the Orthodox Christian scholar in the academy. Thus far, at least six lines of questioning frame this investigation. These, we believe, can begin and sustain a conversation on the vocation of the Orthodox Christian scholar:

1. How has the topic of Orthodox Christian faith and the values of higher education been discussed in Orthodox Christian institutions of higher learning? How did this conversation affect the institutional history and outcome, if at all?
2. Does being an Orthodox Christian matter in the academy? Does the faith commitment of an Orthodox Christian scholar have any bearing in her/his scholarly work? Does it matter to the institution in which she/he works?
3. How do “theological opinions” as well as dogmatic teachings of the Orthodox Church have an impact on her/his scholarly activity?
4. Does being an Orthodox Christian contribute to the “way of knowing” of her/his scholarly work, especially outside of religion and theology? For example, Orthodox Christianity is comfortable with mystery and paradox. The faith is seen as a way of life, not merely a set of intellectual propositions for affirmation, thereby integrating theory and practice. It describes itself as being holistic. Have these characteristics influenced the Orthodox scholar in her/his work?
5. Are Orthodox Christian scholars in religion departments, “ghettoized,” in any way, i.e., are they hired to teach only ancient, medieval, or Eastern Church topics? What is or what could be the contribution of Orthodox theological scholarship to other theological conversations?
6. How does the Orthodox Christian scholar relate to students, especially Orthodox? Does the faith bond and commitment create a unique pattern of relationship and mentoring?

To begin this conversation, OTSA intends to invite a group of Orthodox Christian scholars from various colleges and universities in the United States to reflect on these and other questions. The consultation will also welcome scholars from other Christian traditions to participate in this conversation. The meeting will take place during the June 12-14, 2008 annual meeting of the Theological Society. To facilitate travel and to incorporate the membership of St. Catherine’s Institute, the meeting will take place at the Cenacle Retreat Center in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood.

Program

Thursday afternoon, June 12

A panel presentation from three scholars who will each reflect on the issue of Orthodox Faith and undergraduate education from the perspective of their particular institutional histories: Rose Hill College; St. Vladimir’s Seminary, and Hellenic College. The speakers being considered for invitation: Profs. James Cutsinger (University of South Carolina) or Kimberley Patton (Harvard Divinity School) who each had a tie to Rose Hill College; Dr. Thomas Lelon, President of Hellenic College during its period of greatest enrollment and presently Vice-Chairman of its Board of Trustees, Rev. Dr. John Erickson, a Professor of Church History at St. Vladimir’s Seminary during its years with an undergraduate program. An excellent moderator of the discussion would be Dr. Candace Hetzner of Boston College, who has been actively involved with the undergraduate faculty of Hellenic College as it works to develop a new core curriculum. Each presenter would also be expected to prepare a paper for publication.

Thursday evening, June 12

A “keynote” presentation by a prominent scholar on the present discussion of faith and learning in undergraduate education. The keynote address will place the present

conference in conversation with the broader conversation of religion, scholarship, and higher education, and if possible, touch on the possibilities and complexities of this for the Orthodox given the Orthodox Church's long history and perhaps in light of the afternoon session.

Friday morning, June 13

Will be devoted to papers related to the above series of questions. In addition to invitations for papers to selected scholars, this proposal will be attached to OTSAs Call for Papers for the Annual Meeting. Each presenter would also be invited to prepare a paper for publication.

Goals and outcomes

- Develop a network of Orthodox Christian scholars, outside of theology and religious studies disciplines.
- Publish any papers and outcomes either in book form or on an appropriate website.
- Expand the reach of the Orthodox Theological Society in America beyond the Boston-New York corridor, where it has traditionally held its Annual Meetings in its history.
- Expand the reach of the Office of Vocation and Ministry and Hellenic College beyond its campus. To date, OVM has brought scholars to it; with this grant, OVM will reach out physically to scholars.
- Extend the OVM's initiative to enhance the capacity of Orthodox faculty across North America to mentor students in the vocational arena.
- Network Orthodox scholars with leadership of Orthodox Christian Fellowship

Evaluation

The evaluation will emanate from the presentations and the conversation that these generate. We intend to invite three graduate students to listen to the conversations, interview participants at the meeting, and develop a report on their findings. We also intend to invite the evaluator from the Office of Vocation and Ministry to participate and offer an evaluative perspective. In many respects, the meeting itself is an evaluation of the presence of the Orthodox Christian scholar in the academy, albeit from the discrete perspectives of those who will participate.

References

- Prothero, Stephen (2007). *Religious literacy: What every American needs to know – and doesn't*. San Francisco: Harper One.
- Eck, Diana (2002). *A new religious America: How a "Christian country" has become the world's most religiously diverse nation*. San Francisco: Harper One.