COMMENTARY

‘Orthodoxy or Death’: The embrace of Orthodox Christianity by the modern far right

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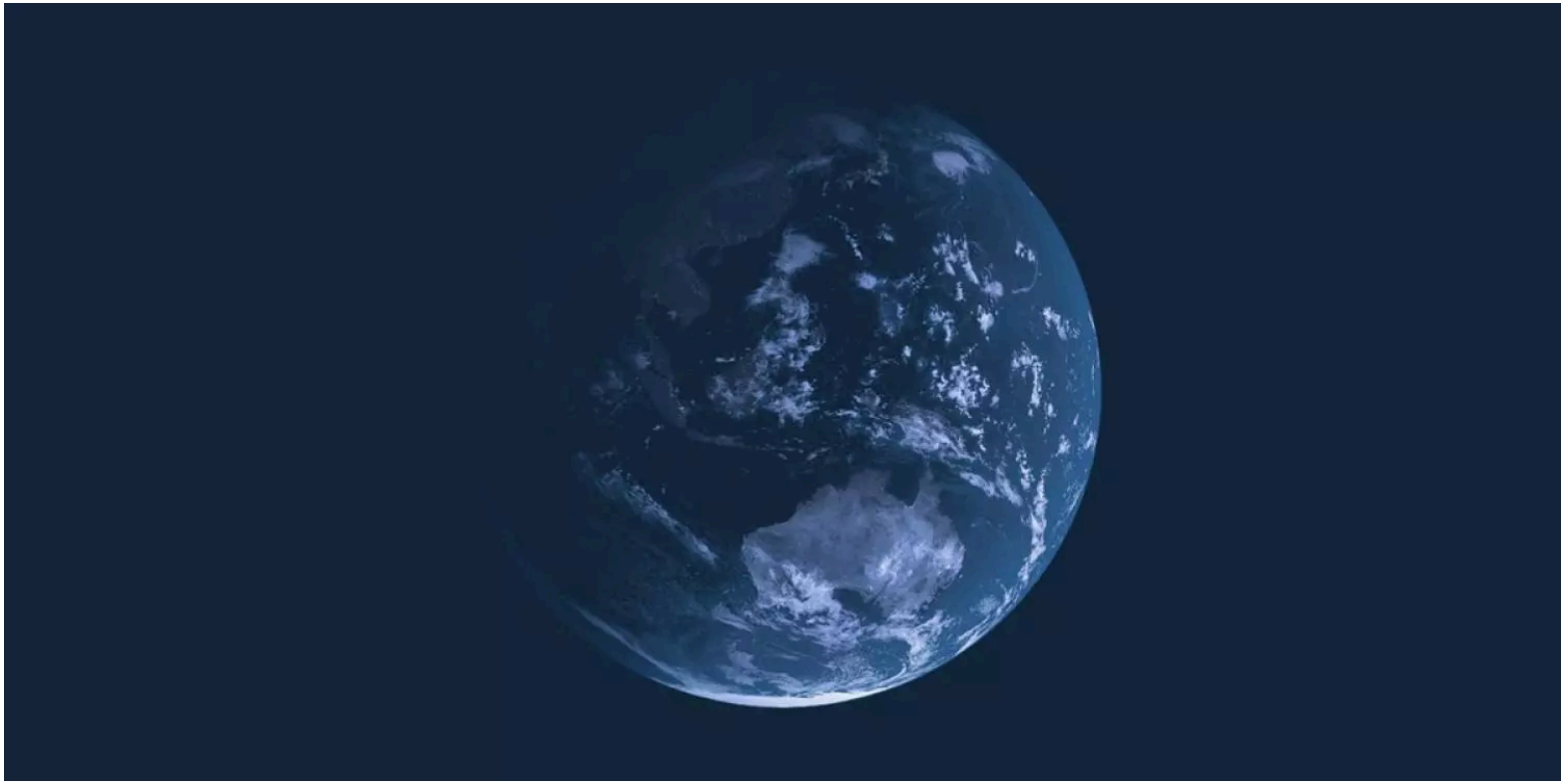

Introduction

In recent years Orthodox Christianity has gained in exposure and appeal within the far right. This includes growth in the religious appropriation of and conversion to Orthodox Christianity by a number of modern far-right movements within the Anglosphere, largely facilitated by the digital environment, globalization and Russian state influence and cultivation of the far right.

Much of the scholarship regarding the role of Christianity in the ideology and narratives of far-right extremism has tended to focus on Western Christian denominations, primarily within Catholic or Protestant traditions. The connections between Orthodox Christianity and far-right actors and movements within the

Anglosphere, particularly within the online Orthosphere subculture (Sellanraa 2012, Dyga 2014), however, have remained largely unexamined in the extremism research literature due to the relatively recent emergence of the connections between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Western far-right actors (Beutel and Perliger, this volume).

Scholars who have examined the conversion to Orthodox Christianity of far-right actors from the Anglosphere have primarily emerged out of other disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, often through the ethnographic study of specific communities, and from the disciplines of theology and history (Kelaidis 2016, 2017, 2019, Leonova 2017, 2019, Bringerud 2019, Lukasik 2021, Riccardi-Swartz 2022, Moreton 2022). There have also been journalistic accounts of the conversion by far-right actors to Eastern Orthodox Christianity (Yousef 2022) and the broader role of the Russian state and Russian Orthodox Church in cultivating the far right. Non-profit organizations who track the far right, such as the US-based Southern Poverty Law Center, have also reported on incidents and connections between far-right movements and Eastern Orthodox Christianity (Phillips 2014). Orthodoxy in Dialogue, a progressive forum for Orthodox Christian voices, has similarly tracked the rise of this phenomenon (Orthodoxy in Dialogue 2018a).

This chapter seeks to build upon this emerging set of resources and analyses to examine the specific appeal of Orthodox Christianity to two subcultures of the far 228right: white nationalists and the manosphere, the latter connoting a networked online space that opposes feminism and promotes patriarchy through the rhetoric of ‘men’s rights’. The chapter will also focus on how far-right influencers who convert to Eastern Orthodoxy interpret the theology and history of the Eastern Orthodox Church to justify and reinforce their ideological positions and narratives, specifically around male supremacism and ethnonationalism.

Conversion to Orthodox Christianity among the Western far right reveals how the harnessing of religion is a political and ideological act, not just a spiritual calling. Features of the Orthodox Christian religion – in particular, its patriarchy, hierarchy, traditionalism, anti-modernity and mysticism – are highly appealing to the far right, who draw on these features in their attempt to use religion as a means to justify exclusionary practices and ideological positions.

Orthodox Christianity

I use Orthodox Christianity to refer mostly to the Eastern Orthodox Churches that recognize the first seven ecumenical councils of Christianity and are a communion of autocephalous congregations (e.g. the Greek, Russian, Serbian, Antiochian, Romanian). These congregations shared communion with the Church of Rome until the East-West Schism of 1054 (the Eastern Orthodox Church also officially refers to itself as the ‘Orthodox Catholic Church’; in this context, ‘catholic’ means ‘universal’ and not the Catholic Church of Rome). At times I also use Orthodox Christianity to include the Oriental Orthodox Churches (Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Syrian, Indian and Eritrean) who left the Eastern Orthodox communion after the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 over a Christological dispute that caused a schism between Byzantium and the Churches of the Oriental Orthodox communion. I do not use the term ‘Orthodox Christianity’ to mean small ‘o’ orthodoxy – an ecclesiastical term stemming from the Greek, ortho (straight) and doxa (belief) – which various Christian denominations, including the Protestants and Catholics of Western Christendom, use to denote true or traditional belief.

It is important to note at the outset that the appropriation of Orthodox Christianity by far-right converts and movements, particularly within the online Orthosphere, is

often removed from the parish life and praxis of the multitude of diverse expressions of the faith by both traditional and non-traditional Orthodox Christian communities, something reflected by several denunciations of far-right appropriation by Orthodox Church figures (Phillips 2014).

Furthermore, as far back as 1872, the Eastern Orthodox Church officially decreed that phyletism – the concept that pastoral care by a particular Orthodox church can be directed only to the members of specific ethnic groups (interpreted in the modern period as racial or ethnic hatred or discrimination) – was a heresy (Alexopoulos and Johnson 2021). Eastern Orthodox leadership figures have used the doctrine of phyletism to excommunicate far-right actors who hold racist views or who promote an ultranationalist agenda.

In examining Orthodox Christianity's appeal to the far right, I do not suggest that Orthodoxy appeals only to converts who hold far-right ideological views. A wide variety of individuals who are attracted and have converted to Orthodox Christianity hold a myriad of political and ideological beliefs and attitudes (Herbel 2014). Similarly, those born into the faith and who come from the traditional ethnic bases of Orthodox rites espouse a range of political and ideological positions (Davis and Robinson 1996). This examination of the appeal of Orthodox Christianity to the far right is thus not intended to negate the experience of 'vernacular theology' (Bringerud 2019) or to homogenize the various lived experiences, attitudes, distinctions, levels of religiosity and differences in theological interpretation among Orthodox Christian individuals and traditions.

Moreover, the same aspects that far-right extremist converts to Orthodox Christianity find appealing about the religion – its emphasis on the communal over the individual; its enduring values and practices in the face of modernity; the rigour

of its praxis combined with mysticism and mystery; its claim of an 'unbroken tradition of apostolic Christianity' (Slagle 2011), doctrinal conservatism, gender essentialism and theological justifications for traditional gender roles – are the same aspects of the faith that many other non-far-right converts also find appealing about the faith. The sense of dissatisfaction either with one's original faith or with society more generally that often drives conversion is hardly unique to far-right actors (Herbel 2014, Bringerud 2019) and is certainly not always explicitly connected to ideologically driven beliefs or justifications.

Orthodox Christianity and the far right

With these important caveats, there nevertheless remains a historical legacy of far-right, ultranationalist convergence and influence within Orthodox Christian communities and churches that modern far-right actors draw upon. From Codreanu's Legionnaires in Romania to Greece's Golden Dawn, various fascist and far-right movements have publicly embraced Orthodox Christianity as part of their exclusivist projects and have been supported by elements within their respective Orthodox Churches. They are now held up as historical examples to follow by modern-day far-right white nationalists. Some elements within Eastern Orthodox Christian communities also have a long history of antisemitism (Eisinga, Konig and Scheepers 1995), Islamophobia and reactionary politics – again, elements that are shared with the modern far right.

Some scholars have suggested that the far right's embrace of Orthodoxy is based on the systemic presence of xenophobia, racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia within Christian Orthodox communities (Kelaidis 2016, Leonova 2017, 2019). At the very least, there is a recognition of common attitudes and narratives prevalent in both Eastern Orthodox communities and far-right movements (Kelaidis 2019). This has

reinforced perceptions that the Orthodox Churches are natural allies of those on the far right, insofar as there are elements with Orthodox Christian denominations who hold similar beliefs and ideas around the role of Jews in society, opposition to homosexuality and LGBTQI rights, and reactionary tendencies around multiculturalism, feminism (Phillips 2014) and the so-called 'theology of cultural Marxism' (Dyga 2014). There are also shared concerns about secular modernism, progressivism and Islamic expansionism, all of which both far-right actors and elements within Orthodox communities present as threats to Christian civilization.

Another dimension involves the ways in which some elements of Orthodox Christian communities, particularly in diaspora settings, who have been targeted by violent Islamist extremists and jihadist movements have found common cause and shared narratives with reactionary and far-right actors and movements within the Anglosphere. This is especially the case for Oriental Orthodox sects (Lukasik 2021) and revivalist nationalist Eastern Orthodox Christian movements within the Serbian, Greek, Romanian and Russian Orthodox churches which have a history of engaging with ultranationalist, authoritarian, anti-communist, anti-Muslim and fascist ideas and movements.

There is also a geopolitical dimension to the growing appeal of and conversion to Orthodox Christianity by the modern far right. This stems in part from the cultivation of the far right by the Putin regime in Russia and its supporters in their effort to undermine state adversaries in the West (Kelaidis 2018, Butt and Byman 2020). The Putin regime has enlisted and utilized Russian Orthodoxy and religious organizations such as the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) and the World Congress of Families (WCF) as part of this effort (Stoeckl 2020, Moreton 2022). This, alongside the resurgence of fascist and other far-right groups in predominantly Orthodox countries across Eastern Europe, has contributed to the notion that the

Orthodox Church can serve as a natural ally and spiritual foundation for many different strains of the far right (Phillips 2014).

The foregoing discussion helps explain why Orthodox Christianity appeals on a number of levels to those within the far right. Below, I will provide examples of recent far-right influencers who have converted to or promoted Orthodox Christianity and focus on what I identify as two main appeals of Orthodoxy to far-right converts from the Anglosphere: first, Orthodox teachings and traditions related to patriarchy, gender essentialism, traditional gender roles and heteronormativity, and second, Orthodoxy's model for ethnically based spiritually informed communities. In the following two sections, I will discuss how the theology and praxis regarding these two issues can be construed by the far right and how they are used to justify their exclusionary practices and ideologies.

The embrace of Orthodox Christianity by white nationalists

A number of far-right converts to Orthodoxy from the Anglosphere who have been influential both offline and in the online Orthosphere have come from the United States. One of the most cited examples is the American white nationalist Matthew Heimbach, the founder of the white nationalist Traditional Workers Party (TWP) and a prominent far-right influencer who has forged networks between many US-based and international far-right and white nationalist movements (Feuer and Higgins 2016). Heimbach was a key organizer of the Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally in 2017, 231one of the United States's largest, most violent gatherings in recent times that brought together various white nationalists and alt-right groups. Heimbach participated in Charlottesville, waving an 'Orthodoxy or Death' banner as he scuffled with counter-protesters (Leonova 2017) and was subsequently indicted for conspiracy for his role in the violence that ensued (Heim 2016).

Prior to his advocacy of Christian Orthodoxy in Charlottesville, Heimbach became a convert to the Antiochian Orthodox Church on Lazarus Monday in 2014, along with his former father-in-law and fellow white nationalist Matthew Parrott (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.a.). Heimbach has spoken publicly about his religious conversion and its role in his aim of creating a white nationalist movement based on Orthodox Christianity and its tenets.

Just days after his official conversion, Heimbach attended the SlutWalk protest at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB), an annual demonstration denouncing rape culture and victim-blaming, as a counter-protester. While supposedly holding a prayer vigil at the site, Heimbach engaged in an altercation with a member of the IUB Antifa and bludgeoned him with a large wooden Orthodox cross. Footage of the altercation went viral, a stark and violent illustration of Heimbach’s association with Orthodoxy (Phillips 2014).

After this incident, there were multiple calls within his church for Heimbach’s censure. The Antiochian Archdiocese to which he had originally converted excommunicated Heimbach and Parrott soon after, charging them with phyletism and banning them from participating in rites and receiving the sacraments in any canonical Orthodox Church. Heimbach and Parrott initially responded to their excommunication by saying they would take a step back from political involvement. However, both resumed their activities within weeks. They denied that white nationalism was a heresy within the Orthodox Church and accused the Antiochian priest and bishop who excommunicated them of being the real heretics. Heimbach also claimed that his excommunication was repealed by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia and that he had found a spiritual home within a Romanian Orthodox Church, saying, ‘My spiritual father is a priest in Europe who has the support of his bishop’ (Hunter 2015).

In addition to Heimbach and Parrot, another prominent TWP figure, Matthew Raphael Johnson, also converted to Orthodox Christianity. Johnson was a former academic at the University of Nebraska as well as a former priest with the noncanonical Old Calendarist Greek Orthodox Autonomous Orthodox Metropolia. He too was excommunicated and defrocked for phyletism. But that has not stopped Johnson from promoting Orthodox far-right-tinged nationalism and traditionalism. His podcast The Orthodox Nationalist is featured on the TradYouth website (Kelaidis 2017) and on Radio Aryan (recently renamed Radio Albion), a platform that describes itself as ‘fighting for white revival’ (Orthodoxy in Dialogue 2018b). Rusijournal.org, a single webpage WordPress site, presents ‘Professor Johnson’ as a ‘Russian Orthodox medievalist’ whose ‘academic work is dedicated to the delegitimization of the global capitalist system and the demystification of the ideology that justifies it’, alongside a range of his writings (rusijournal.org n.d.). These writings are a compendium of revisionist Russian, Serbian and Orthodox history, philosophy and theology. Johnson 232is also a bolsterer of Putin ‘as a necessary balance to American empire and the liberal authoritarianism it enforces’ (Bonald n.d.).

Concerned about the appropriation of Orthodox Christianity by far-right figures like Heimbach and Johnson, in 2018 a group of American Orthodox clergy issued ‘A Statement Concerning the Sin of Racism’. The Statement declares that ‘racism, antisemitism, and xenophobia are sins. Anyone within the Orthodox Church who promotes or is sympathetic to any of these must therefore repent before God for the sake of his or her own soul, and for the good of the Church’ (Orthodox Christian Clergy Against Racism 2018). Johnson offered a rebuttal to this Statement titled ‘The Orthodox Nationalist: A Response to the Orthodox Clergy Condemnation of Nationalism’ (Johnson 2018). In his response, Johnson argues for racial and ethnic separation: ‘[The Statement’s signatories] are forcing modern liberalism onto a

church that is liberalism’s antithesis. The Orthodox church’s ancient position on race and Nationalism is diametrically opposed to this jejune, sentimental nonsense.’ He goes on to say, ‘I describe the basis for racial separatism given the violence our communities are subjected to by non-Whites daily […]. This is a racial war because crime in Europe and America is racial. I never wanted to become a racial nationalist, it was forced upon me given the facts of life’ (Johnson 2018).

These TWP members are but one example of white nationalists who have embraced Orthodoxy; many other far-right figures have also converted to and promoted Orthodox Christianity as a vehicle for their political and ideological goals. Antifascist websites have also exposed the embrace of Eastern Orthodoxy by a number of other white nationalist figures, singling out members of the neo-Nazi Iron March Forum who have converted to Eastern Orthodoxy and regularly post about Orthodoxy and reactionary sentiments (Dogpatch Press Staff 2022).

Heimbach was also not the sole Orthodox Christian to participate in the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017. In the weeks leading up to the rally, other far-right Orthodox figures, mostly affiliated with canonical parishes in the American South, organized on social media in support for or participated in the rally (Leonova 2017). Still other figures, like Christchurch killer Brendan Tarrant, referenced movements like the Serbian Chetniks, a group known for its genocidal violence in the Balkans and its strong association with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Dylan Roof, an American white supremacist who committed a mass shooting in 2015 targeting an African American church in South Carolina, also had connections to Eastern Orthodoxy. His spiritual advisor was an Orthodox priest (although this priest denounced Roof’s actions and there is no evidence he shared or encouraged Roof’s racist beliefs) (Leonova 2019).

There are also indications that some Orthodox clergy members in the West, particularly in the United States, are drifting towards far-right political ideology. Lenova (2019) cites evidence of these clergy making xenophobic remarks on Facebook and the trend of both Orthodox Christian clergy and laity posting Confederate flags superimposed with 'IC XC NIKA' (an abbreviated form of the Greek 'Jesus Christ Conquers') as Facebook profile pictures. Orthodox priests such as Reverend Mark Hodges participated in the 6 January 2021 riots on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Hodges was suspended from the ministry by the Orthodox Church in America's Diocese of the Midwest as a result (Stewart 2021), but he later picked up his ministry within the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia.

The embrace of Orthodox Christianity by far-right figures is not just an American phenomenon, however. Antipodean far-right figures have also latched onto Orthodoxy's appeal. In an Australian far-right online conference in 2020, Blair Cottrell, a well-known Australian far-right influencer who is also connected with neo-Nazi figures, also promoted Orthodox Christianity as a means to combat 'leftist infiltration of schools and local politics' and other supposedly corrupting modern influences. In the Q&A session during the 2020 online conference, Cottrell made the following comments in response to a question about how to blunt 'leftist influence' within families and local communities:

> **The Greek Orthodox Church is probably your best bet. Get your kids into a Greek Orthodox Church. Hopefully we can create an [Australian] Orthodox Church of our own in the future. An Anglo Orthodox Church or something like that. It doesn't seem to exist for some reason but that's going to be extremely important in the future … Hopefully we**

> **could create it … I think religion is going to be a necessary aspect of healing in future. (Cottrell 2020)**

While admitting that his own faith and relationship with God is currently lacking, Cottrell goes on to say:

> **There needs to be a church of some sort that is a cultural community hub for white people. We haven't done well without it. All the evidence points to the necessity of a central church culture … It needs to be a project in its own space. It needs to be separate from politics. It needs to be focused on community welfare. (Cottrell 2020)**

He goes on to discuss how the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia has shared goals with the far right, for example, its staunch opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage and its mobilization of the Church's Australian congregations to vote against this in Australia's 2017 plebiscite on the issue (Brook 2017). He praises the Greek Orthodox community for their traditional family values and patriarchal system, saying, 'They've got good girls there' (Cottrell 2020).

Cottrell also contrasts what he believes to be the 'soft' and 'feminine' version of Anglicized Christianity with what he perceives to be Orthodox Christianity's 'hard' and 'masculine' account, focusing on the visual representation of Christ's body:

> **The Orthodox have got it right. They still have the most hard-line faith, in terms of Christian faith, anyway. All your modern-day Anglo Christians are about ‘turn the other cheek’, ‘Christ loves everybody’. They are talking about the Holy Spirit as their bodies degenerate into s — because they are too lazy to do anything. People who represent Christ these days, especially white people, are full of s— and they don’t know what they are talking about. If you look at the images of Christ in the Greek Orthodox literature, he doesn’t look like a pansy, he doesn’t look like a soft c—, like he’s made to look in the majority Anglicized Christianity. He’s got a stern hard look. (Cottrell 2020)**

Cottrell attempts to reference (but can’t quite recall accurately) Lk. 12.51, a passage that quotes Jesus as saying, ‘Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division’, in an attempt to use Christian teachings to justify the need for violence and division.

The Orthosphere

The take-up of Orthodox Christianity by Western far-right figures globally has also been spurred and facilitated by the digital environment, where far-right online subcultures have both merged and emerged. The clearest manifestation of this is the emergence of the Orthosphere and the ‘Orthobro’ phenomenon.

The Orthosphere has been described as an online subculture that puts an ‘Orthodox glaze’ over internet meme and troll culture inherent to the manosphere and far right

(Malone 2021). The Orthosphere network is a loose collection of online bloggers and content creators who reject liberalism, postmodern relativism and materialism. While specific beliefs and goals within the Orthosphere can differ, it is united by a reactionary anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQI, anti-democratic, anti-globalist and often antisemitic agenda informed by the traditionalist movement's conviction that the world is corrupted by modernity (Sedgwick 2004, Teitelbaum 2020).

Their ideology centres on the defence of 'traditional authority, traditional morality, the monarchy, the patriarchal family, the ethnos, and the Church' (Sellanraa 2012). According to the Orthosphere website Throne and Altar, the Orthosphere's goal is 'defending the legitimate authority of God, tradition, fathers, and kings against the diabolical partisans of freedom and equality' (Bonald n.d.).

The Orthosphere is populated for the most part by an Anglosphere-derived array of male American, British and Australian reactionaries who elaborate on the ideological frameworks informing their critique of modern liberalism and defence of traditionalism. Many are converts to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. But others are traditionalist Catholics or ultraconservative Protestants whose ideas are nevertheless heavily influenced by the history and example of Byzantium and Orthodox Christianity.

The Orthosphere has an anachronistic understanding of Orthodox Christian history and the historical and theological schisms within Christianity. It is also mostly, although not exclusively, removed from ecclesiastical authority, pastoral oversight of priests and other church leaders and the lived experience of Orthodox Christian communities (Malone 2021). In some cases, Orthosphere actors align with the Russian Orthodox Church against the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and other Eastern and Oriental Orthodox rites, a preference that evidences the

influence over and cultivation of the transnational far right by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state (Malone 2021, Riccardi-Swartz 2022).

Participants in the Orthosphere are self-described 'Christian reactionaries' who believe that modernity, as a basic anchor-point of contemporary Western civilization, has become 'corrosive' to traditionalist values and identities (Dyga 2014). In turn, the Orthosphere has been promoted as a new space to promote far-right ideas in the West that rely on the assertion and reinforcement of strong traditionalist moral, philosophical and spiritual doctrines.

Described as an 'exotic hothouse of alternative rightist tendencies' (Dyga 2014), the Orthosphere's rejection of modernity and contemporary society is a rejection of what its proponents call 'The Cathedral […] the framework of educational institutions, the media-entertainment complex, major political parties' and accompanying progressive discourse and legislative overreach regarding social, political and cultural issues that frame 'everything traditionalists value as mere "social constructs" to be deconstructed at will' (Dyga 2014).

While their discourse is steeped in the language of spirituality and morality, self-described 'Orthos' acknowledge they are a political and ideological project. According to the Orthosphere Throne and Altar blog site:

> **We recognize that the societies of the West are radically disordered, and it is our desire that they move toward a more proper order, one which acknowledges Christianity. Although we are Christians, our primary concern here is not with how individual souls are to be saved**

from the wrath of God, but rather with how society ought to be ordered.(Bonald n.d., see also Dawson, this volume)

One subset of the Orthosphere is the 'Orthobros', young to middle-aged men of the alt-right who have recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy, either from other Western European Christian denominations or who have had no prior religious affiliation. These men spend their time challenging what they perceive as the prevailing modern secular and atheistic zeitgeist and what they view as evidence of the degeneracy of secular Western democratic countries. Their answer to addressing the supposed degeneracy of modernity is to valorize a return to the Byzantine Empire's Orthodox cultural and religious traditions – which they see as embodied in contemporary terms by Putin's Russia or the American far-right Trumpian movement – in order to 'save' civilization from the destruction wrought by the Enlightenment values responsible for modernity (Colavito 2017).

Orthobros not only take aim at social and political liberalism but also direct much of their commentary towards 'dunking on' Catholicism and Protestantism, re-enacting a contemporary manifestation of the historical legacy of competition and conquest between Rome and Constantinople, culminating in Christianity's Great Schism of 1054. Yet their embrace of modern digital technologies also sees them create content and perform online, championing the superiority of Eastern Orthodox Christianity by referencing and using a 'fashwave aesthetic' (Smith IV 2018) and the tropes, behaviours, memetic irony (Keen, Crawford and Suarez-Tangil 2020) and language of far-right online troll culture.

Orthobros and the manosphere

The Orthobros both emerge from and merge with the online manosphere. The manosphere (Ging 2019) is another online subculture that incorporates incels (involuntary celibates), men's rights advocates and pick-up artists (PUAs) who oppose feminism and espouse hateful attitudes towards women and often the LGBTQI 236community. The manosphere promotes an anti-feminist, grievance-fuelled masculinity that is pervaded with entitlement and bigotry (Sugiura 2021). Discourse within the manosphere can often also overlap with far-right sentiments, sharing similarly racist, antisemitic, anti-globalization, anti-immigration, homophobic views and authoritarian tendencies. Participation in the manosphere has been seen as a stepping-stone into other extreme far-right movements (Romano 2018), and there are multiple links between the manosphere and white supremacist and neo-Nazi movements (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.b), an unsurprising feature given these movements' shared characteristics of misogyny and notions of male supremacy. The element within the manosphere that is more concerned with reinforcing patriarchal norms as a means to rectify the perceived societal takedown of cisgender men through feminism (Clark-Flory 2020) is the common point of intersection with the Orthosphere's promotion of a similar agenda.

Prominent 'Orthobro' figures include Jay Dyer, Roosh V, Brother Augustine and Norwegian Nous, all of whom associate with the far-right dimension of the manosphere and embed the promotion of patriarchy and authoritarianism within their discussion of Orthodox Christian theology and praxis. Websites like Patristic Faith feature their writings along with other Orthobro influencers. The conversion of prominent manosphere influencer Daryush Valizadeh, known online as 'Roosh V', is a prominent example of how the Orthosphere and the manosphere intersect. In his former life as a PUA, he advocated and justified rape, saying, 'No means no – until it means yes' (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.c) and 'Make rape legal if done on

private property' (Wellman 2015). Since his conversion, Valizadeh has publicly renounced his PUA identity in a statement on his blog and declared his baptism into ROCOR (Valizadeh 2021a).

Although Valizadeh may have renounced his PUA identity, his male supremacist views are still prevalent in his persona as a born-again Orthodox Christian. Though he now decries pick-up artistry, saying he used to 'make women God' and now shuns discussion and advocacy of casual sex, he has not explicitly renounced his previous male supremacist and misogynistic writings. Declaring that 'the manosphere had hit a dead end' (Valizadeh 2021b), he has instead found an alternative vehicle for his ideas through his involvement in the Orthosphere and its interpretation of Orthodoxy as a reactionary revolt against modernity and a pathway towards restoring male stature and authority.

Roosh V's conversion is not unique, nor is it a deviation from his radical trajectory as a male supremacist and reactionary. It is representative of a broader trend within the far right and the manosphere that has seen many far-right adherents embrace Eastern Orthodox Christianity as a bulwark to religiously justify their extremist ideologies.

Patriarchy, heteronormativity and anti-feminism in Orthodox Christianity

To understand the specific appeal of Christian Orthodoxy's patriarchal structures and gender norms for far-right actors within the Orthosphere, manosphere and white nationalist movements, it is necessary to understand their doctrinal and cultural 237underpinnings. Patriarchy applies quite literally to Orthodox Christian sects: they are all headed by male bishops, called Patriarchs, who are the head of each autocephalous church within the Orthodox communion (Kizenko 2013). Women are excluded from the critical fraternities of the priesthood, the monastery and from

other clerical roles (e.g. acolytes or deacons), and thus from any official clerical leadership role.

Women in the Orthodox Church are more restricted in official positions than even those within the Catholic Church, where women may now serve as readers and assist as altar servers, as well as assisting priests in administering Holy Communion. There is no such dispensation for women in the Orthodox Churches. Referencing 1 Tim 2.12 – 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence' – women, as a rule, are not to raise their voice in Orthodox Churches, which excludes them from making readings from the Bible and delivering homilies (although there can be exceptions and variations within parishes).

Priesthood within the Orthodox Church remains an exclusively heteronormative male domain. Priests must (with rare exception) be married, cisgender and heterosexual. The clergy hold significant institutional power within the rigid hierarchy of the Orthodox churches. Obedience and the subsuming of personal desire are spiritual goals in Orthodox Christianity. Within the Orthodox Christian tradition, this obedience is understood to be first and foremost to God, but the priest is the earthly representative of God and therefore the congregation is expected to obey the priest's instructions and his divinely guided interpretation of scripture. Since only men can become priests in Eastern Orthodox churches, ultimate obedience to and authority on earth is therefore given to men alone.

Within the more intimate domestic sphere, men are enjoined as heads of household to be the 'priests', with the accompanying power and authority over their family. Marriage, again heteronormatively legitimated only between a man and woman, is viewed as a microcosm of the broader church and its relationship to the divine. Through marriage, men, representing Christ, are the divinely ordained heads of

households, and women, representing the Church, as guided and nurtured through Christ's love and sacrifice, form the foundation of the Christian community.

The patriarchal role of men is reflected clearly in the marriage vows of Orthodox Christian rites where the authority of the husband is codified. Marriage vows include commands expressed in the Pauline epistle Eph. 5.22: 'Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord.' Husbands are enjoined to 'love their wives as Christ so loved the Church', and wives to 'obey your husbands'. Unlike many Western Christian denominations, in which such enjoinments of women's obedience to men are no longer part of the wedding vows or can be excluded according to the preferences of the betrothed, marriage rites and vows made in Orthodox churches, like all other rites, cannot be altered. Such beliefs and praxis reinforce male authority within the Orthodox Christian tradition and the Orthosphere, white nationalists and other far-right converts tend to emphasize the hierarchy and privilege such authority grants to men, rather than the deeper, genderless teachings of spiritual discipline and obedience.

They also ignore the teaching of many Church fathers who emphasize the message embedded within the marriage vows of loving mutual responsibility rather than hierarchal gender-based roles, ignoring the part of the Pauline epistle in which men 238are commanded to 'love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body' (Eph. 5.28-30). Orthodox Christianity includes those who advocate for a reformed interpretation of the marriage vows and the Church's teachings around gender roles (Vrame 2008). And in practice there are deviations from, variances in individual attitudes and nuances and negotiations around the issue of priestly and male obedience within parishes and families. However, despite these differences in orthopraxy, obedience

to the priest and to male heads of household continues to prevail within mainstream interpretation and the institutional position of the Orthodox churches on gender roles (Vrame 2008, Bringerud 2019).

Such restrictions on women and insistence on the primacy of men are not only evident in Orthodox belief and praxis around the priesthood and marriage but also reflected in the gendered organization of physical space of the churches (McDowell 2013); while not always strictly adhered to in some parishes, traditionally men and women sit on separate sides of the church during services. Women are expected to dress modestly and cover their hair while in attendance at church (as is common in many other religious traditions). Women are not only barred from formal positions within the Orthodox Church; due to their purported 'nature and sexuality and bodily functions' (Keinänen 2010), their participation in official ceremonies is also restricted. The Orthodox Church follows ancient Judaic practices around the sanctity of the tabernacle, which restricts women from entering the altar behind the iconostasis and does not allow them to receive communion while menstruating or for a set period after childbirth. This explicit exclusion and proscription of women is appealing to elements of the far right because it reinforces the privileges of men and emphasizes essentialist gender roles and norms. Humility and modesty are important practices that shepherd the believer towards holiness within Orthodox Christianity, but these values are especially emphasized for women. Because their modesty is strongly emphasized and their official role in church life is limited, this codifies and theologically justifies that position that women should hold a secondary or separate status (Vrame 2008).

For reactionary right actors and male supremacists, such canonical proscriptions against women's participation, the emphasis on their obedience and the preservation of exclusively male roles are highly appealing. Far-right converts focus on this model

of divinely sanctioned male power. This religious exposition provides justification for their anti-feminist and male supremacist political and ideological goals. Eastern Orthodox Christianity offers them a useful bulwark against other Western Protestant and Anglican denominations which have expanded the role of women in the clergy and official leadership positions. This is a very palatable construct for far-right male converts, who tend to gloss over the differences in orthopraxy within Orthodox Christian communities, the negotiations around these constructs among many Orthodox Christianity adherents, and the 'vernacular theology' that has allowed women substantive roles and meaningful experiences within the Church (Keinänen 2010, Kizenko 2013, Bringerud 2019).

It is also attractive to the far right because not only does the Orthodox Christian tradition believe that gender roles and authority are divinely ordained but because 239within the Orthodox Church it is easier to derive additional authority as a member of the clergy. Becoming a priest in Eastern Orthodox churches does not require celibacy as does the Catholic Church; in fact, priests are required to be married with families. Bishops, however, must be celibate and rise up through the ranks of monks.

For Orthodox converts from the manosphere in particular, Orthodox Christianity offers them two avenues of power and agency. For those more motivated by the hierarchy of men over women and restoring male authority, they can turn to the Orthodox priesthood and the authority of the male head of household. For those who are obsessed with their own celibacy, such as incels, they can find power in the Orthodox tradition of monasticism and the emphasis on virginity and celibacy. Rather than a source of shame or enfeeblement, virginity and asexuality are symbolic of holiness within the Orthodox tradition (Bringerud 2019). The two most revered and holy figures in Orthodox Christianity – Jesus (God) and his mother Mary (the

Theotokos, or the God bearer) – are virgins in Orthodox theology. The figures who hold the highest authority in the church are celibate monks and bishops. Orthodox Christianity offers a model of masculinity removed from sexual prowess or procreation which can be highly appealing for the incel faction of the manosphere. In Orthodox Christianity, a man who does not engage in sexual activities is considered to be a more pure and holy representative of the Father; such men can 'become representatives for the ultimate human potential for godliness' (Bringerud 2019). Sexual relations are also prohibited before marriage, and sexual desire is viewed as something to be conquered and overcome as an aspect of discipline and obedience in Orthodoxy. This aligns with the manosphere's preoccupations around controlling their sexuality and sexual desire (similar to the abstinence from sex promoted by far-right movements) as a means to male empowerment (Burnett 2021).

Ethnicity, anti-globalization and anti-Western expression

Eastern Orthodoxy is also a mode of Christianity where spirituality is suffused with identity, ethnicity and cultural heritage. The Orthodox communion's autocephalous, decentralized churches are traditionally organized along national or ethnic lines. The declaration of phyletism as a heresy did not prohibit the churches from solidifying their own ethnic characters. From their very descriptors – for example, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox or Coptic Orthodox Church – their religious praxis is inexorably tied to their ethnic and national cultures, histories and identity. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into a detailed examination of Church history and the complex relationship between nationality and Orthodox Christianity. I note here, however, that ethnic identity is deeply embedded in and informs religious rituals and practices (Oddie 2012). Religious identity and national identity and politics are often deeply intertwined (Bringerud 2019).

The Byzantine Empire was a theocracy of Orthodox Christianity (Papanikolaou 2003), but it was after the fall of Constantinople and under the Ottoman Empire’s millet system that ethnicity and Orthodox religion became more intertwined. Under the Ottoman Empire, the Orthodox Church was used as an administrative unit. 240Patriarchs became not only the spiritual leaders of their congregations but were made political and civil leaders who had jurisdictional authority over Christians under the Ottomans (Ware 1997, Papadakis 1988). This allowed Christianity to survive under Ottoman rule, but it also made it ‘nearly impossible to separate the civic from the spiritual’ (Bringerud 2019).

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, giving rise to smaller nation-state, many of them united behind a vision of Orthodox Christianity as a marker of national identity (Ware 1997). This led to the development of ‘political Orthodox Christianity’, which connotes religious practice in the service of ethnopolitical identity (Skedros 2016). During the emergence of nation-states among communities in the former territories of Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire, Orthodox Christianity, intertwined with ethnicity, was used as a means of nation-building. To practice and defend Orthodox Christianity was simultaneously to practice and defend one’s ethnic and/or national identity (Bringerud 2019).

This history is now being referenced and aspired to by far-right converts to Orthodox Christianity, and particularly by white supremacists, as a historical and alternative model of nationality and citizenship to the current model of pluralistic nationality in Western democracies based on allegiance to a set of ideas and principles rather than to national or ethnic sameness. The far right has valorized the historical development of Eastern Orthodoxy along ethnic lines, and the enmeshment of Orthodoxy and nationalism, as a model to oppose what they see as the corrupt and degenerate pluralism and multiculturalism of Western democracies and to ‘protect’

the white nation. As Katherine Kelaidis (2017) writes, 'While this system of ecclesiastical governance predates by centuries modern concepts of race and nationalism, for a nationalist steeped in the rhetoric of racial separatism, it is impossible not to see a reflection of separatist beliefs' and an 'endorsement of their views.'

Orthodox Christianity's history of religious practice tied to ethnically based communities also appeals to far-right actors who desire the creation of their own exclusivist ethnically based communities. Whether Orthodox converts or not, many on the far right believe, as one anonymous poster on a far-right forum writes:

> **At the end of the day, the countries who have Orthodox populations have remained more racially and culturally sound than the nations with no religion or, worse, Protestantism. The Orthodox base is a major reason why Greeks, Russians and Serbs understand the Jewish question far better than any member of your college Atheists club. (cited in Phillips 2014)**

Similarly, the American far-right Orthodox convert Matthew Heimbach, discussed above, has used the history of the Christian Orthodox church to justify and promote his separatism and white nationalism (Hunter 2015), arguing that Orthodoxy can be used as a model for the ethnic self-determination of all races, not just the white race:

> **I converted to the Orthodox Church because it theologically in my opinion is the superior Church. Through apostolic succession the Church has remained true to the principles of the disciples and the founding of our Faith. White nationalism can be labelled […] [as] an extension of an overall umbrella that respects our regional and ethnic heritage. […] As an Orthodox Christian I believe in the separation of races into ethnically based Church’s [sic]. That is why even in Orthodoxy there is for instance a Greek, Russian, Romanian, Serbian, etc. Orthodox Church. Regional and racial identity is a fundamental principle of Christianity, much to the dismay of Leftists. I believe black Christians should be in their black Church’s [sic], with black priests, having black kids, going to black Christian schools, etc.(Heimbach 2013)**

Heimbach (2013) not only seeks to appropriate Orthodoxy for the protection of white identity in general but considers the preservation of what he sees as a very specific regional subcultural identity: ‘Southerners have a very distinct culture, and to be able to dream of an autocephalous Dixie Church would be amazing.’ He has acknowledged the significant inspiration he has derived for his views from Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a Romanian fascist figure who in 1927 founded the Legion of the Archangel Michael (also known as the Legionnaires), a violent ultranationalist and antisemitic organization that mixed fascism with a mystical Romanian Orthodox revolutionary message. Codreanu and the Legionnaires utilized religious symbolism, Orthodox Christian theology and morality to shape a movement meant to counteract

the modernization, democracy and 'Judeo-Bolshevism' they believed were tarnishing an otherwise rural and morally pure nationality in Romania (Haynes 2008).

Concluding remarks

The conversion by white nationalists, male supremacists, manosphere influencers and other far-right extremist actors to Orthodox Christianity fulfils a broader need or a 'spiritual hunger' and meaning that mere ideology and political advocacy seemingly cannot satisfy for this cohort (Burton 2019). Yet while Orthodoxy may fill a spiritual yearning, it can also be used to justify, actualize and sustain the political and ideological positions of the far right. Traditionalist religions like Orthodox Christianity are being conscripted by the far right because they assess their political efforts to be insufficient or faltering. They need a spiritual movement to sustain their political and ideological battles. In this way the far right's embrace integrates the spiritual and the political. It is emblematic of the recognition by far-right converts to Christian Orthodoxy that religion can play an important role in the creation of social categories and identities, including ethnic and racial constructions, the acceptance and justification of gender norms, and the reinforcement of ideological beliefs.

In addition to Orthodox Christianity's appeal as a model for exclusivist ethnically based communities and the structure of strong patriarchy to uphold male authority and 'family values', its perceived value lies in its attractiveness for the far right as an anti-democratic, anti-liberal bulwark against the decadence and weakness of liberal modernity. It is this combined appeal of the solace of the traditional and the exoticism of the unfamiliar – something at once old and new that hearkens back to a perceived 242historical authenticity that can nevertheless be practised and lived in the modern era – that make of conversion to Orthodoxy a countercultural, even revolutionary, form of expression and resistance for far-right actors. Far-right

converts have made and are likely to continue to make a deep ideological and cultural investment in what they perceive as Orthodox Christianity's timelessness, tradition and authentic expression of Christianity – unblemished due to its stubborn and staunch opposition to change and modernity – coupled with its commitment to hierarchy, patriarchy and its example of community based on ethnic identity.

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