

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Beresford James Kidd. *The Churches of Eastern Christendom*. London: Kegan Paul, 2005. 541 pp. \$212.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7103-1081-1.

Reviewed by Michael Hughes (University of Liverpool)  
Published on H-Ideas (December, 2007)



## An Old-Fashioned View of the Eastern Churches

The publishers Kegan Paul have reprinted Beresford James Kidd's 1927 book *The Churches of Eastern Christendom* as part of their Library of Religion and Mysticism. The decision is perhaps a strange one. The book offers a rather dry review of the development of the Eastern Churches from the Council of Chalcedon down to the twentieth century. It is, as a result, not likely to appeal much to the general reader interested in improving their understanding of the evolution of Christianity over two millennia. Nor is it likely to be of great interest to the specialist, already familiar with the main historical outlines of the subject, and concerned with a set of questions that would not have occurred to Kidd. It is nevertheless always pleasing to see the reappearance of a book that would otherwise remain in obscurity.

The real interest of Kidd's book lies in the circumstances surrounding its origins. It is therefore a shame that there is no modern introduction to help orient the contemporary reader. The Eastern Churches had for centuries been viewed in Britain as essentially alien institutions, products of the backward "east," espousing a dubious theology and committed to rituals that owed as much to superstition as they did to a sustained effort to glorify the Christian God. The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed the development of a more sustained interest in eastern Christianity. A number of members of the Oxford Movement, such as William Palmer of Magdalen College, argued that at least some of the eastern Churches had maintained theological and ecclesiological traditions that meant they were close to the spirit of early Christianity. The same was true of W. J. Birk-

beck, who a few decades later worked tirelessly to promote a union of the Anglican and Russian churches, arguing (absurdly) that there were no fundamental theological or practical obstacles to such a far-reaching move. This romantic and naïve view of Eastern Christianity was countered by the more sober approach that characterised the work of such organizations as the Eastern Churches Association, which produced a series of publications designed to familiarize a British audience with the churches of the East. By the time that Kidd published his book, the persecution of the Russian Church at the hands of the Soviet government, along with the genocide of Armenian Christians in Turkey, had helped to develop still further interest in the Christian East. The slow growth of the ecumenical movement between the wars, embodied in such developments as the Faith and Order Movement, also fostered a sense that British Christians needed to develop their understanding of all the members of the world-wide Church.

Kidd's book sought to provide its readers with an understanding of the history of the various eastern churches and had little to say about theological matters. The author spoke unproblematically of the contrast between the "Orthodox" churches, committed to a theologically correct position on such matters as the nature of Christ's divinity, and the supposedly "heretical" Monophysite and Nestorian churches. Kidd's approach to his subject was severely historical. He worked hard to provide his readers with an understanding of the main events that had helped to shape the development of eastern Christianity. The sheer scale of the task inevitably

meant, though, that his treatment of complex questions was necessarily, on occasion, both truncated and simplistic. His discussion of the Russian Church, for example, fails to engage properly with the way in which successive tsars used splits within the Church as a means of developing and asserting their control over its organizational structure. Nor is the discussion of the Uniate Church at all satisfactory. Kidd also failed to convey how the complex relations between the various eastern churches both shaped and were shaped by wider international developments. At the same time, paradoxically, the sheer weight of historical detail means that the book was (and is) unable to play the role of a useful introduction to the whole subject.

Kidd was not an obvious author for a book such as *The Churches of Eastern Christendom*. He freely acknowledged in his introduction that he did not have expertise in the huge number of languages that were needed by any one seeking to engage in such a project. He instead relied heavily on works such as A.C. Headlam's *The Teaching of the Russian Church* (1897) and Adrian Fortescue's *The Orthodox Eastern Church* (1907). Kidd's lack of ease with his

material perhaps helped to explain the rather turgid character of his book. It also helps to explain why he failed to engage with the important question—which preoccupied many other Britons interested in the subject—of whether popular piety in the Christian East was in some sense more profound than in the West. Kidd had little interest or curiosity about the inner life of those who belonged to the eastern churches. Nor did he seem to have much interest in seeking to understand the distinctive spiritual identities and concerns of the Christian communities of the East.

The price of this reprint of Kidd's book means that it is likely to be purchased for the most part by university libraries. It will be of some interest to scholars concerned with understanding how the Christian East was perceived by a prominent Church historian. It may also provide a useful reference work. Most students of Church history in general, and the Eastern Churches in particular, will nevertheless only view *The Churches of Eastern Christendom* as one entry on a very long reading list. Its limitations mean that it can never serve as a definitive text.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas>

**Citation:** Michael Hughes. Review of Kidd, Beresford James, *The Churches of Eastern Christendom*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. December, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13985>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).