At a time when knowledge about Russian society is in high demand due to the country’s ongoing aggressive war in Ukraine, this new volume by the American historian of religion Scott Kenworthy and his Russian colleague Alexander Agadjanian, published a few months before the start of the hostilities, is very timely. It purports to provide a comprehensive overview of the role the Christian religion has played and plays in Russian society. Reading the book against the backdrop of Russian aggression in Ukraine can help provide vital background information necessary to understand the religious aspects of the ongoing conflict. The two authors show a thorough understanding of the subject matter and neither embellish nor demonize Russia and Russian society.

The volume is a welcome introduction to the Orthodox Church as it presents itself in Russia today from a largely nontheological perspective. Instead of dwelling lengthily on theological differences between Eastern and Western Christianity, Kenworthy and Agadjanian concisely focus on Russian Christianity as it developed historically and is lived today. There are few redundancies and the authors masterfully weave the complex realities of the Orthodox Church in Russia into a coherent narrative that remains engaging and challenging throughout.

The structure of the volume is organized along the line common to all books in the series Understanding World Christianity, which is a refreshing take on Russian religious history. Instead of the traditional three headings, history, theology, and contemporary developments, the authors have used this structure to offer an innovative angle to studying the church in Russia. The first chapter offers some fundamental theological distinctions under the heading “denominational identities,” a chapter that is clearly addressed to a North American audience. The concept of denomination is alien to both Russia and most of Europe, but this problem has been succinctly solved by focusing on the very basics of Orthodox Christianity.

The second chapter is concerned with geography, breaking up the monolithic image of a Russian church that is the same across the vast territorial expanse of the Russian Federation. While the third chapter, on Russian church history, is rather classic, chapter 4, on a biographic approach, is again innovative. Juxtaposing the parallel biographies of four important church figures all born in the 1860s, Kenworthy and Agadjanian are able to tangibly explain the tribulations
of the first half of the twentieth century in various parts of the Russian church without having to resort to redundancies. The remaining biographies in this chapter are not as interwoven and overlapping, but still very well clarify the lives of important Orthodox Russians.

Chapter 5, on theology, covers a number of developments that partly parallel the biographical data in the preceding chapter, but extensive cross-referencing avoids repetition also here. The final chapter, on the twenty-first century, is a chilling reminder that the signs for Russian military aggression in a self-proclaimed culture war have been clearly visible for some time already, although less aggressive tendencies are also mentioned—tendencies that are heavily discouraged in the current militarized climate in Russia.

All in all, the volume by Kenworthy and Agadjanian is a very well accomplished undertaking that provides both a thorough introduction for people without prior knowledge as well as a fresh and comprehensive look at a variety of aspects that might have escaped the attention of experts in the field. The decent but careful inclusion of references to recent English-language scholarship on many specific facets of Russian Christianity is also an important reminder that the complexity of the subject matter can be expanded at will. However, the two authors have made a formidable job at containing this complexity within the bounds of this volume without oversimplifying or confusing the reader. The book thus promises to become the go-to introductory volume for students and other readers interested in the story of Christianity in Russia—also, and maybe especially—after the end of the war in Ukraine.

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