

An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches, by John Binns

reviewed by [John Garvey](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

Only a few decades ago there were relatively few good sources of information about the Eastern Orthodox Church, but a remarkable publishing surge has now made many fine books available. Though the best single introduction remains *The Orthodox Church*, by Timothy Ware (now Bishop Kallistos), John Binns's solid work is among the good ones. Binns is vicar at Great St. Mary's Church in Cambridge, and vice-chairman of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, a group dedicated to dialogue between those engaged in Orthodox Christian studies at Cambridge. Binns's familiarity with Orthodoxy's strengths, weaknesses and contemporary challenges is thorough.

There are a few small problems and some missed opportunities here. The Orthodox Church in America, a jurisdiction granted autocephaly (self-governing status) by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1970, is referred to in a couple of places as the Orthodox Church of America. Many scholars, both inside and outside of Orthodoxy, would argue that Peter was not only not the first bishop of Rome, but never exercised anything like episcopal office. The chapter on missions might have mentioned the remarkable work now being done in Asia and Africa. The concentration here is on the past, and then on contemporary Europe and America.

In the chapter on church and state, Binns writes of the thrones that exist in some churches, one for the bishop and one for the king. The throne "is still in place awaiting the Christian ruler who will be a new Constantine and order the affairs of the state in cooperation with the Church to uphold a godly and Christian society." Though some Orthodox think this way, the powerful countertrends should be mentioned. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom--much admired by Binns, and rightly so--thinks that the end of this relationship between church and state was providential.

But these are relatively minor points when compared with the strengths of a book that covers so much tangled and difficult history and does it so well. Binns is

particularly good on the current state of the Orthodox Church and the problems it faces as it is forced into dialogue with other churches, other religious traditions and modernity. He is right to point out that, even after the devastation wrought by the Fourth Crusade in 1204--often considered the beginning of the schism between East and West--there was significant cooperation between Orthodox and Catholics. But in the 18th century three Orthodox patriarchs insisted that Catholics who wished to become Orthodox should be rebaptized, and the pope strictly forbade common worship. "This virtually ended cooperation," he writes, "and has been claimed by some as the real beginning of schism between Catholics and Orthodox."

Binns writes well about the current divisions between progressive and reactionary strains in Orthodoxy. He takes note of the depressing book-burning in Ekaterinburg, Russia, where the works of the modern Orthodox writers Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff and Alexander Men were destroyed. His take on the future: "A strong and determined conservative and traditional majority will remain, alongside an open and progressive minority, both of which will be held together by a cautious episcopate. This coalition of opinions, both of which are deeply rooted in and integral to Orthodox Church life, will continue to be involved with ecumenism and other churches, but will challenge and reshape the way that ecumenical organizations function."

Binns's passionate wish for Christian unity is apparent. He offers an intriguing picture of a recently canonized Russian saint, Makarii of Glukhareve (d. 1847). For asking to be allowed to translate the Bible into contemporary Russian, "he was punished by being required to celebrate the liturgy daily for six weeks--a punishment he enjoyed to the full, unable to see any hardship in this discipline." At one stage he shared his church with Muslims. He dreamed, Binns writes, "of a cathedral with Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran altars within it." St. Makarii and Binns are clearly kindred spirits.