TEMENOS
Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion
Temenos Vol. 61 No. 1 (2025), 7–26
DOI: 10.33356/temenos.160164

Temenos Lecture 2023

"Only Russia Can Save the World": Reactive Orthodoxies, Political Technology, and Religious Worldbuilding

SARAH RICCARDI-SWARTZ
Northeastern University

Abstract

Drawing on previous research dedicated to the examination of far-right media worlds that link Christian conservatives in the United States and Russia, this talk offers a broad overview of how technology and ideology transform American social ecologies. Contending that digital media are crucial to the social recalibrations of Russian Orthodoxy in the global context, this talk invites us to see better the philosophical connections across local religious beliefs and global politics in our mediated contemporary moment.

Keywords*: Russia, United States, Orthodox Christianity, far right, media technologies, worldbuilding*

My research has long centered on how political authority, religious practices, and media technology are co-sharers in the transformation of American social ecologies.[1] Broadly, my work has always hinged on this idea of transformation, whether through understanding early American communal groups, print media depictions of women religious leaders, or contemporary American citizens who want to upend democracy through illiberal means. A curiosity about the role transformation plays first led me to consider the reproduction of both Eastern Orthodoxy and its iconic religious imagery in the United States. I wanted to understand how social shifts in flows of

1 An editorial note: This lecture, given in a publicly accessible style (which I have kept here in its published form), draws significantly from the text of my first book. See *Between Heaven and Russia: Religious Conversion and Political Apostasy in Appalachia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

information and ideas were expressed both in images and communities, particularly when Orthodox icons have long been understood as one of the more august artefacts of the faith that have social economies and spiritual kinship ties for believers (Hanganu 2010). I undertook early stages of this work in the Missouri Ozarks between 2011–2014 with a group of Orthodox Christians, thinking about issues of social politics, digital technologies, and rituals of worldbuilding. I settled on Missouri in part because it was where I was doing a graduate work in Religious Studies at the time, but also because it seemed to me, at first, a counter-intuitive location for the rise of this kind of trans-Atlantic thinking.

In 2017, when I had the greater time and space to unfold these ideas in what would eventually become a book, I knew I wanted to work in Appalachia with a Russian Orthodox convert community that was quite socially different than those I had worked in previously. This Appalachian community seemed to be at the fulcrum of Orthodox socio-political transformation through conversion. Community members were also keenly aware of Appalachian stereotypes held by outsiders who assumed them to be "backward," uneducated, and – a term commonly used in media depictions about Appalachians since the twentieth century – "hilbillies" (Harkins 2003). Believers saw their conversions to Russian Orthodoxy as breaking through cultural stereotypes; they were not, many argued, "good old boys" or "ignorant hillbillies." Indeed, I found conversation partners who were cogent about their place in the history of American politics and religion, while being philosophically adroit as they expressed why they turned eastward to intellectual ties in Russia. My interlocutors in Woodford, along with fellow converts around the United States, invite us to see better the technological and philosophical connections across local religious beliefs and global politics.[2]

Before attending to these connections, however, I want to address the "Orthodoxies" in the title of this paper. I use the plural here because it has been my experience that most Western observers approach Eastern Orthodoxy in monolithic and often relatively Orientalist terms. Certainly, there are core logics, traditions, and theologies that unite national forms of Eastern Orthodoxy together in shared communion that emphasizes, as Pierre Bourdieu and others have pointed out, "a straightened opinion" (Bourdieu 1982, 154–55 [130–31]). Yet, Orthodoxy is an institutionalized religion like any other, which means it affords multiple and dynamic productions of the

2 Woodford is a pseudonym. The town, religious communities, and people worked with are all coded for anonymity.

social even amidst corrective rubrics for adherence. As my title also suggests, religious opinion is not the only zone where efforts to straighten are taking place. The term political technology (Russian: *polittekhnologiya*) from my title draws on legacy language around the mediatization of the political in the post-Soviet context (Van Herpen 2013). This term came into broadest use at the time of the Yeltsin administration in the 1990s as the emergent internet was upending and speeding the disaggregation of information gateways that had long been governed by the socialist state. More recently, political technology also came into play over concerns with Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections as a telescopic, transnational expression of repressive political arts linked the Putin administration (Lewis 2020; Shekhovtsov 2018; Wilson 2023). While this type of political technology, one that is tied to a foreign power trying to influence American politics via cybernetic means, is already well interrogated by scholars, I extend it here by drawing our attention to how American religious converts are making use of digital techniques and global information streams to create new American worlds (Levin 2020). To understand these larger formations at work in the United States (and abroad), we first have to consider how they are built and what gives them their shape.

Looking at both converts in rural Appalachia and digital right-wing Orthodox communities that seemingly incite political radicalization, I offer the term "Reactive Orthodoxy" (Riccardi-Swartz 2022). This hybridized conception of Orthodoxy melds together Christian nationalism, Orthodox theology, and traditionalist philosophies of social politics in ways that are socially and technologically mobilized. I should also make clear here about what I am eager to move away from: first, a longstanding assumption that American Christianity is fundamentally a narrative of Protestantism, given how influential its idioms and its torsions remain for the country today; and second, that a preoccupation with contemporary American Christianity should somehow be about missions that move from West to East. The vectors here are quite different. I turn our attention to an American movement that embraces the social ideals of a foreign power and draws together religion and politics in a reactive framing, not only against what most hold to be ideologies and practices of progressive secularism but the very political structure of the United States itself – democracy. The narratives I share with you speak not only to the ongoing transformations in contemporary American religious and political life but, as I argue, to the centering of technology and media in those social recalibrations. For the groups I have worked with and continue to engage, conversion opened the door to an

imaginative, accepting, and even radical world of religious and political possibilities that the United States, at least in the 2010s, they believed did not afford them.

The persuasive arts of reaction

The history of religious conversion is the history of ideological conviction. Persuaders and the persuaded alike typically have a desire to show the truthfulness of their positionalities. They want to express why aligning with their group or with their worldview will be advantageous spiritually, socially, and politically (Kravel-Tovi 2023). Conversion can aid the construction of a social world. This worldbuilding is part design and part ideology. Creation, repair, conservation, and preservation are its cornerstones. To build a world requires time, patience, connectivity, and ideological confidence. It also requires, drawing on the work of anthropologist Jarrett Zigon, a politics of disappointment (Zigon 2018). Zigon's work focuses on the liberative possibilities of worldbuilding, whereas my use of the concept draws out how disappointment aids reactionary projects. The disappointment, disenchantment, and disillusion that Appalachian converts to Russian Orthodoxy felt with the United States and with progressive politics in the late 2010s was expressed in their turn to forms of political authority and religious belief outside of the U.S., guided by digitally persuasive, often conspiratorial information networks, their turn to anti-democracy options for governance, and to moral boundary-making steeped in traditionalist conceptions of the body.

In the context of Reactive Orthodoxy, worldbuilding is a project attuned to digital and analogue temporalities, metaphysics, and social-moral anxieties, one that is caught up with conservative biopolitics, Russian-American geopolitics, and religious soft power both at home and abroad. In the small West Virginia town where I conducted a year of ethnographic fieldwork, converts constructed their own social world made possible by the social scaffoldings of Russian Orthodoxy, conversion comradery, and global information networks. Woodford is a town of some 1200 people; approximately 10% of the town citizens were converts to Orthodoxy when I first visited there in 2015. I arrived in Woodford after visiting convert communities across the United States. I was particularly intrigued by the founding of a digital icon studio in Woodford. In January of 2017 I returned to the community to film a documentary with the studio members central to the creation of digitally reproduced religious images; they were proud of their efforts to circulate their icons and their beliefs. This film proved to be an

access point into both the community's good graces and their understanding of Orthodox life in America.

Founded in the early 2000s, the Orthodox community in Woodford included a men's monastery of some thirty monastic brothers along with a few lay people attached to the community. At the time of my fieldwork, this monastic community was one of the largest English-speaking Russian Orthodoxy monasteries in the world. A parish of approximately 100 members was located just a few miles away; it served families who moved to the area to be near the monastery but not attached to it. While I was there, all but one of the monastery members and 90% of the parish were converts; conversions increased the community by another 10% by the time I moved away. Overall, the Orthodox Christians in Woodford were well-educated, Caucasian, and boasted a high percentage of males: this is largely because of the men's monastery but also because Orthodox ordination is limited to males, and men, by my experiences in the field, convert more often than women.

In terms of methodologies, I conducted qualitative research, including participant observation, plus hybrid formal interviews that focused on life stories, along with a series of structured questions. Over the course of the year, I interviewed members of the Woodford Orthodox community, religious leaders from other Christian denominations, local politicians, and everyday citizens. I was also engaged in digital ethnography with other Orthodox Christians online to whom Woodford residents directed me; these content creators were typically white males who were active across a variety of digital platforms, including Twitter (now X), YouTube, Gab, and Telegram. This digital research informed my first book and became the basis of a larger data collection project online that informs my ongoing research on digital information networks, social policing, and the role of online religion in the (re)production of racism.

The Appalachian converts, along with other established convert communities throughout the United States and their social media compatriots, are part of what I have termed "Reactive Orthodoxy." This hybridized form of religiosity is a worldbuilding project built on an imagined nostalgia for prerevolutionary Russian Orthodoxy and its attendant monarchic politics, Christian nationalism, traditionalism, and an apocalyptic disenchantment with modernity and democracy. By traditionalism, I mean the political philosophy that focuses on the defense of primordial and universal truth, angst about racial and sexual purity, and fears over white extinction, particularly in the strain espoused by Julius Evola, a thinker much favored in fascist Italy

who is now invoked by American king-makers such as Steve Bannon and across Europe in radical groups, including the now convicted Golden Dawn in Greece (Sedgwick 2023). Together these ideas give Reactive Orthodox a language to express their worldbuilding project of moral securitization.

In June 2021, far-right internet celebrities from across the U.S. gathered in Argos, Indiana to host a "Trad Forum" that focused on securing the social sphere of American society through the implementation of traditionalist values (Church of the Eternal Logos 2021). This group would meet again in 2022, but this time in West Virginia. Organized by Orthodox convert Michael Sisco, a former candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in West Virginia, the conference featured E. Michael Jones, a Catholic activist labeled by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an antisemite (2007). Speakers held a wide range of political views often associated with the far right, including monarchism, neo-confederate leanings, and fascism. Crucial to their platform was the idea that a return to a broadly cast tradition, not limited to but most often conjured through firm social boundaries and gender binaries, is needed to thwart secular modernity in the U.S. Aspiring to everything modernity is not, Reactive Orthodox make use of storied thematic elements – a triptych of family, morality, and purity long associated with White Christian hegemony – to make their political vision a transnational reality (Bjork-James 2021). While these values have long been the project of conservatives in the United States – as one might track back to Max Weber – my suggestion here is that Reactive Orthodox and others are mobilizing around the issues in far more socially volatile, globally connected, and digitally savvy ways (Weber [1905] 1930).

Reactive Orthodoxy should not be read as U.S. Orthodox Christianity writ large, in the sense of a classical movement of immigrant believers and converts, expressed in the pan-ethnic attempts in the late-nineteenth and twentieth century to create a homegrown form of the faith in the United States (Erickson 1999; Herbel 2014). Historically, Orthodoxy in the United States has not been tied to White Christian nationalism or a disillusionment with democracy. Rather, groups such as the Orthodox Church in America (coming out of the Russian tradition), the Antiochian Archdiocese comprised of Middle Eastern Christians, and the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, have used their ethnic identification as part of social solidarity building projects and as outreach through heritage festivals. At the same time, however, they also took part in American enculturation and assimilation processes, including the embrace of clerical collars rather than robes, the regional use of pipe organs, inclusion of pews, and engagement with socially conscious

organizations that might appear alien to most Orthodox on the other side of the Atlantic (Kitroeff 2020).

In some contrast, Russian Orthodox parishes, particularly those of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), preserved much of their heritage through their insular emphasis on the use of Slavic liturgical languages and practices, although by the twenty-first century, English-language use skyrocketed in services. This linguistic change happened in part because of the influx of converts, most of whom did not take it upon themselves to learn Russian or the liturgical language of Church Slavonic, as was the case in my fieldsite. Yet however these jurisdictions expressed themselves, they were still under the larger umbrella of American Orthodoxy that was synonymous with diaspora and mission. Overall, American Orthodoxy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was far too concerned with the interchurch politics of creating a cohesive pan-Orthodox community to be deeply caught up in American social politics – although the Greek Orthodox Church offered some support to the civil rights movement. Contemporary formations of Orthodox Christianity, especially ones rich with convert populations, are far more invested in having their political ideologies, often framed by former Evangelical converts as theologies, spread through and even enforced in the social sphere (Riccardi-Swartz 2023; Saler 2024).

Conversion is a central aspect of contemporary Orthodoxy in the United States. Since the latter half of the twentieth century and particularly in the twenty-first century, the immigrant faith has become a religious home for American converts (Lucas 2003; Slagle 2011). Often hailing from Evangelical and Catholic backgrounds, converts have a large hand in shaping or perhaps colonizing what many see as a new social ethos in U.S. Orthodoxy. As I write about in my book, the growth of converts in conservative forms of Orthodoxy (specifically in the Russian tradition) seems to reflect an epistemological shift in how religion is perceived of in relationship to the Western, specifically American, cultural body politic. In a survey study that I conducted with Orthodox women's groups on Facebook, I found that 32% of the respondents were either unsure about or opposed the separation of church and state (Riccardi-Swartz 2021b). Most of those respondents wanted a Christian nation to become a legal reality. This politically assertive strain of Orthodox Christianity in the United States, one that emphasizes traditionalism, is often found (but not always) in Russian Orthodox communities, and it is at the core of the reactive movement that views democracy, and its political attachments, as devilry. It is fair to say that the contemporary political preoccupations that many converts have with traditional values, and their

accompanying hallmarks – homophobia, xenophobia, science denialism, and anti-intellectualism/anti-public education – have brought about the rise of Reactive Orthodoxy, a movement that shares many similarities with other far-right conspiracy movements around the Deep State, the America First party, and Evangelical expressions of Christian Nationalism (Mudde 2019). What makes Reactive Orthodox adherents distinct, however, is their geo-political impulse toward salvation from political authorities outside of the United States.

The Eastern Promise

"The only thing that can save the world is Russia," a young convert monk from Evangelical Presbyterianism proclaimed to me one spring afternoon in Woodford. Note that the monk said "Russia" rather than "Russian Orthodoxy." In a geopolitical spiritual statement, he finds salvation through nation rather than church. The young monk was not alone in his apocalyptic embrace of Russia. Community members saw Russian Orthodoxy, and by extension the Russian state and Putin, as defenders of conservative morality "in a world gone mad." Post-Soviet Russia, the creation of both church and state as it were, a geopolitical, religiously attuned country, becomes a beacon of hope for the eschaton (meaning the divine plan for the end of the world) or as one of my digital interlocutors termed it: "a lode stone for the compass of my soul." Far-right American converts to Orthodoxy are not alone in their emphasis on foreign authoritarian politics as salvific. In 2013, far-right figure Rick Wiles and Larry Jacobs, who was the managing director of the World Congress of Families, talked about the importance of Russia in protecting Christian rights globally. Jacobs argued that "the Russians might be the Christian saviors of the world at the UN because they are standing up for these traditional values – family and faith" (Tashman 2013).[3]

Right-wing American communities are also turning to Hungary, with Tucker Carlson, Rod Dreher, and other conservative pundits suggesting that through the adoption of Viktor Orbán's authoritarian ideas they might find a political respite from the diversity of democracy (Albuquerque 2023; Eisen and Joscelyn 2023). These communities are done with the American democratic project, including President Trump, turning instead to authoritarian or king figures abroad who might secure a different political future for the U.S. The American far right is a phantasmagoric amalgamation of groups

3 I talk in-depth about American-Russian conservative relations in other publications. See Sarah Riccardi-Swartz 2021a in the bibliography.

that self-select through cybernetic currents of information, comradery, and disciplinary drive. I go out of my way not to suggest that these ideas are "misinformation" or "disinformation." When talking about the generators of reactive dispositions, it has been my experience that we lose out at the chance to understand these worlds when we have already dismissed them as misguided or invalid. The point, instead, is to understand their power, how it circulates, and their place in a changing American landscape.

An apocalyptic rhetoric of fear and alterity among Putin and Orbán's conservative comrades in Appalachia was on display daily. The abbot of the monastery, a convert by way of Catholicism, firmly believed that only Russia was "trying to turn away from abortion, sensuality, and immorality" (Interview with author, August 2018). Drawing on an inverted Cold War model, in which Russia was the global savior and the United States was an ungodly place, converts readily engaged Russian state-sponsored media, including *Russia Today* and the English-language service of *Pravoslavie* (Orthodoxy), alongside content from conservative American media outlets. Through these media sources they crafted fictive narratives about Russia that reinforced their worldbuilding project of Russia as salvific. As one convert monk in his mid-twenties pledged to me, "There's a glimmer of goodness in Russia that we can't see anywhere else in the world. Putin is an echo of Tsar Nicholas II." While we tend to think of conversion in spiritual terms, most of these believers also converted to Russia's contemporary illiberal ideologies, seeing Putin as the guardian of conservative family values or "the divine institution," as anthropologist Sophie Bjork-James terms it, and as the potential creator of contemporary monarchic governance not just in Russia, but, perhaps, in the U.S. too (Bjork-James 2021).

For many in Woodford who viewed the United States through a narrative of moral decline and social downfall, their support of democracy faltered too. Some suggested Putin should invade the U.S.; others, channeling political messianism, believed that only Russia could save the world from the blight of liberal progressive politics. As one elder cleric explained,

> It used to be in the past it was the conservatives who were anti-Russian and the liberals who were pro-Russian; now it's all flipped. A lot of it, as far as I'm concerned, is on a spiritual level. The two roles of our country, as I knew as a child in the fifties, have completely reversed. Our country now represents anti-Christianity and Russia represents Christianity. (Interview with author, 2018)

Mapping their ontological and theological views on to contemporary global politics, these reactive actors drew on the political technologies attached to Russian media worlds to form their opinions of America's demise and Russia's salvific political climate.

The community in Woodford was certainly part of the online social discourses and media worlds of Reactive Orthodoxy, posting Russian government fiat as news, blogging, and sharing conspiratorial ideas, fears, and anxieties with their online compatriots. This media engagement began in the mid-2000s with the arrival of a bishop at the monastery. Benedict, a former high-ranking monk in Woodford, recounted how the bishop would spend hours surfing the Internet, sharing videos from Russian media outlets. Enamored with this "early QAnon type of stuff," the bishop's media engagement began to transform the social ethos of the monastery. A pro-Putin convert, the hierarch's obsession with conspiracy theories "trickled down" to newer and more youthful monks, who would watch exposé documentaries about 9/11 late into the evening. Internet use to engage with Russian political technologies increased during the bishop's tenure at the monastery. Benedict told me that conversations around politics "became ubiquitous" by 2008 in the community. The monks and other converts in the community, and those on social media, have found ways to engage with the political that uses a rhetoric of spirituality to make sense of their ideologies. Putin often served as king figure in their narrative of religious oppression. Believing themselves to be oppressed by the freedom of democracy, the freedom to practice their religious beliefs openly in the United States, Orthodox ideologues take to social media and other forms of public discourse to praise countries in which religious belief is employed by the state as a form of social control, such as through the anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Russia (Kottasová and Chernova 2022).

Far-right American Christians seeing Russia as an arbiter of family values and morality suggests that these worldmaking projects, fed by digitized information, are founded in subjective realities that locate truth not in civic values, democracy, or community, but in philosophically thick, often apophatic, ideologies about the self and others (Moreton 2022). For most of the converts I encountered, democracy was hell. Numerous monks told me that America was a hellscape of liberal individualism without real leaders worth following. A paraphrased quote attributed to St. John of Kronstadt circulated at both the monastery and the parish: "In heaven there is a kingdom, in hell a democracy." The potential return to monarchy in Russia excited my interlocutors about global political change. Well-educated, philosophically inclined, and focused on ritual religiosity that could interpret the issues of

modern life for them, these converts reached beyond their country to a national leader who appeared to have their best interests at heart – or claimed to, at any rate. While Putin's romanticized vision of reality is the product of a post-truth moment steeped in unreality, he has and continues to market a potential world in which conservative Christianity and politics might cooperatively flourish. This world appealed to my interlocutors and others throughout the United States seeking a sovereign for the end of the world (Riccardi-Swartz 2021c).

Certainly, the concept of church-state unity is not unknown in historic Orthodox worlds. The term *symphonia*, the Byzantine understanding of church and state working together in harmony with the state led by a monarch, is what most Reactive Orthodox hope for in the United States, even those such as Michael Sisco, who ran for elected office (Antonov 2020). This, of course, is not theocracy – a concept we see rising among right-wing Christians in the U.S – but it is a philosophical co-traveler (Ingersoll 2015). While most of the converts with whom I spoke understood that the Russian Church and state were separate entities, they nevertheless seemed to view them through the historic lens of symphonia, which they often believed would help aid the return of traditional Christian values to the United States. Finian, a middle-aged family man and a historian, born and raised in Appalachia, converted shortly before I arrived in Woodford. He firmly supported Putin, suggesting that Russia should "crown him tsar and let him rule for life" and that the Russian president should invade the U.S. Others, including the abbot of the monastery, saw Putin as the embodiment of Christian leadership on the global political stage. He explained,

> Russia is trying with all its might to hold up Christian morality and belief and to defend Christians. President Putin is personally rebuilding all the churches in Syria that were destroyed. Not just Orthodox but Catholic and Uniates. He's rebuilding all the churches there. There's no offer like that from America. There's no one speaking up for persecuted Christians except for Russia. (Interview with author, August 2018)

Here the abbot specifically notes that Russia stands as a global purveyor of morality. This language of morality, purity, and tradition is, in many ways, a reimagining of the Culture Wars that takes on digitized, globalized geopolitical aims bent on fracturing the structures of American democracy.

Reactive Orthodox are, of course, complicit in the globalized Culture Wars that spread ideologies with the right set of hashtags for a platform's

AI-algorithm. While not as statistically large or institutionally powerful as various lobbying groups of Christian nationalists in the U.S., Reactive Orthodox Christians are quickly becoming an important transnational node in the growing movements of online radicalism, from live streaming about the Capitol Insurrection to being interviewed by Russian media outlets about conservatism in America. Much like the pixels that comprise a digital image, Reactive Orthodox believers and their allies at home and abroad carefully craft the ideological edifice of their intentional, transnational communities. Their grassroots reach is felt and seen through social media, with users, ranging from tens of thousands of followers to just a handful, engaged with each other in virtual spiritual and political kinship networks found in rural communities with dial-up speeds, across the digital divide to suburban warriors, and stretching over oceans to join arms with comrades abroad; virtual relationships and worlds built in, on, and through technology and ideology. In these and other ways, those who study digital communities, especially Heidi Campbell, have shown how belief and practice are transformed because of technology (Campbell 2010). This is readily seen in the rise of conspiratorial religious language used in social media content about big tech, social control narratives founded in rising antisemitism, and dissident political memes.

Contemporary Orthodox Christianity in the United States is one that is connected largely through digital channels because of the diffuse geographical nature of the church. Through digital platforms, believers connect with each other, offer prayer requests, provide PDFs of liturgical and theological texts, connect to current political and social events going on in regions considered to be traditionally Orthodox, and engage with the curious alike. The "Orthonet," has profound benefits for Orthodox spirituality and sociality, but it has also had a negative impact on intra-Orthodox relations and personal spirituality depending on how it is used. In the U.S., right-wing converts make up a good deal of the English-language Orthodox social media traffic across platforms, and they are quite candid about their ideological beliefs, especially about the fact that they use digital technology to facilitate social collectivity, fight back against the deep state, and monitor "subversives" – a term used widely by Reactive Orthodox believers in reference to those who do not share their moral framings for society.

When I left West Virginia in 2018, I extended my research through digital ethnographic data collection. Emboldened by the fact that I was no longer attached to dial-up speeds in a forest cabin high in the mountains, I set about tracing out the networked connections of Reactive Orthodox actors

online. As I gathered data online, transcribed audio interviews from my fieldwork, read Orthodox social media posts, and watched the increasingly jarring actions of both Putin and the Moscow Patriarchate with respect to Ukraine and beyond, it became clear that Reactive Orthodox converts in the United States are a far more integral part of the media networks of the far/alt-right than I had imagined when I first went south to Appalachia. It is not surprising that Orthodoxy finds much of its social traction through digital media worlds. What is surprising, however, is how the connections forged by Reactive Orthodox Christians through technologies are transforming the social discourses and global production of the faith. Orthodoxy has built its social logics around the preservation of texts, tradition, and hierarchy. The rapid spread of information through digital technology is transforming religious sociality and authority, fueled by the influx of American converts one social media post at a time.

Brave American worlds

Ideological conviction is often at the heart of conversion, but the ways in which that conviction is mobilized have changed because of technological connectivity. In Woodford, most early converts made use of analogue media resources, interpersonal encounters, and institutionalized or autodidactic education. In our conversations, they were cautious about these new worlds around them, observing most simply that the "internet" is changing the Orthodox Church, but they engaged actively in reactive media worlds, nevertheless. In 2019, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow suggested that the internet could usher in the reign of the Antichrist, signaling the risks of AI and a godless technocracy (Clark and Bell 2019). The Orthodox folks with whom I have worked saw the internet as a space of religious development and, especially during COVID, reactive community mobilization (Riccardi-Swartz 2023). At the same time, however, they also expressed concern over big tech data privacy issues and government tracking. Despite hesitations over a digitizing world, Orthodox Christians around the globe do use the internet, and nowhere is that usage more evident than among those whom one might consider far right. Technology becomes a link, a social structure through which they paradoxically build their ideological movement even as they decry big tech.

The beginning of the 2020s, perhaps because of the down time the pandemic provided for many at home to pursue digital content creation, brought to the fore more social-media-focused members of Reactive Orthodoxy who

skew much younger in terms of age and, often, engagement with Christianity. While those in the Appalachian community of Woodford held similar views to the online Orthodox content producers I tracked, they were not comfortable with publicly promoting hate speech and or engaging in physical violence. However, the younger generation of Reactive Orthodoxy that are primarily connected through social media, deploy hate speech, call for violence, and engage with other far-right actors to common goals, such as Curtis Yarvin's traditionalist, neo-reactionary tech movement emphasizing anti-democratic, monarchic views. The story of these digital reactionaries and their ties to America First, nationalist, and trad movements – is one unto itself. However, this younger generation is part of the same digital, social, and kinship networks that share religious belief, political ideologies, nostalgically inclined fears, and familial ties with the Woodford community.

Social media and digital connectivity provide a spiritual space for conversions of the heart to take place; they also serve as a recruitment platform for the radical right. The democratized space of the internet, where seekers can use informal language, memes, and gifs to ask questions and find communitas, provides a digital gateway to Orthodoxy, a religious community that is hierarchal, formal, and often focused on analogue print forms of theological pedagogy for seekers. Technology empowers actors to convert to Orthodoxy on their own terms, for their own ideological reasons. Creating religious authority online, they produce their own catechetical training with ideas disseminated on livestreams, podcasts, and via information on social media. Thus, these far flung far-right actors use the internet to subvert the curatorial parameters put in place by institutional authority that often seek to cull radicalism prior to conversion. Charismatic users such as Sisco, who posted on X (formerly Twitter) on January 6, 2022, "Happy Anniversary of the most epic and awesome thing to happen at the U.S. Capital," have thousands of social media followers. They offer unconventional forms of religious authority or social commentary that interested parties find reliable and relatable.

The digital world affords these reactive actors virtually endless opportunities for individual and collective (re)orientation offline through technological mediated means. Reactive Orthodox, often young males, are outraged by shifting social norms, fearful of potential political persecution, and a motivated to preserve white hegemony. Sisco, who is often featured on pro-white movement podcasts, called for a ten-year moratorium on immigration, while the *Dissident Mama,* a podcaster and YouTuber who started the Southern Orthodox movement, blends the Southern Lost

Cause mythology with Orthodox spirituality in order to thwart what she believes is the ongoing usurping of Southern culture by Yankee liberals. To do so, she networks with southern successionists, White nationalists, and self-identified anti-Semites to resurrect the glory of Southern culture, arguing on a podcast episode "that Southerners were doing just fine before the puritanical-progressives started demanding 'reforms,' fomenting peak strife, and telling otherwise happy "'black bodies' that they were being perpetually persecuted by 'systemic racism' and 'whiteness.'" (Dillingham 2022).

In online spaces, Reactive Orthodox publicly recapitulate conspiratorial thought, social violence, and engagement with political technology – all of which make their views, often expressed in brief social media posts, intractable. Marshaling the resistance of traditionalist anti-moderns, combined with Orthodox theology, and political views steeped in a seemingly fascist language of us versus them, they are emboldened to create social control mechanisms. The gatekeeping zeal of these tens of thousands of reactive social media users is seen in their use of digital images and platforms to crowdsource what they hold to be verification, a way of marking a person as inside or outside of the group based on their facial features, assumed ethnicity or race, physical characteristics, and their potential gender, sexual, and religious identification. This combination of AI, biometrics, and rapid assumption found in reactive online worlds is at the center of my new book project. It focuses on the use of *vernacular social biometrics*, revealing how actively engaged far-right actors are in social violence through virtual verification that mobilizes racism offline. In doing so, I tease out how these intolerant conceptions of the body and person – often proliferated through digital propaganda – are intimately tied to understandings of traditionalism, the history of biologically-focused racism, and the disciplinary structures of political authority. Each of these ideas remain active "insofar as they have some medium" and continue to circulate (Keane 2007, 42). Reactive media proliferate because they are circulated in and through analogue and digital mediums by social actors.

Reactive Orthodox Christians are building their own worlds, one that extends beyond the physical locales of their American homeland through their digital *communitas* and interconnectivity (Bhatia 2023). Far from the Orthodox conservative pundit Rod Dreher's Benedict Option, a communal-living project that draws influence from ancient monasticism and Brethren groups, this reactive world-building project marshals theo-political structures in conversation and tension with ancient monasticism and contem-

porary American life. Religion as a social production, as a human-crafted understanding of metaphysics, struggles with concepts of divinity just as much as it does social connectivity, belonging, and defining boundaries of acceptability. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan note that religion has long been "central to American self-understanding" (2021, 1). This is also applicable to the American political logics – perhaps far more so than many like to recognize. Reactive Orthodoxy is a theo-political project, in many ways, of American exceptionalism that is tightly linked to globalized assumptions about the self, the social, and the Other. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins once reflected in his long-ago book, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, that history is motored by the premise that "men and women are suffering beings because they act at once in relationship to each other and in a world that has its own relationships" (1981, vii). Reactive Orthodoxy, a nostalgic ideological reality, is one of response to relationships that seem dysfunctional to many. Shifting the terms of debate, then, comes in the form of both American exceptionalism and self-loathing, in a world where monarchists, Christian Nationalists, and fearful (potential) expats seek a safe harbor from the storms of secularism.

Conclusion

Zigon's theory of worldbuilding reveals potentials and possibilities constructed in and through new, liberative political models. By the same turn, reactive worldbuilding, digital and analogue, affords us opportunities to see how the political act of creating worlds rests in ideological terraforming through reactionary philosophies, foundational tenets, strict statutes for inclusion based on religious, political, and physical similarities, and even social sanctions, such as online doxing, in order to threaten those with whom they ideologically disagree. One could, and perhaps should, argue that this is the basis of fascism or, at the very least, a hybrid type of fascism that unites religion with the political. Sexual, spiritual, and racial purity fears are part of the Reactive Orthodox discourses found in the information networks, analogue and digital. It takes the form of antisemitism, homophobia, misogyny, and racism, with crossover rhetoric from longstanding right-wing conspiracies blended with traditionalist philosophies that emphasize the need to form new American worlds that extend the work of historical European fascists and contemporary Eurasian authoritarian leaders into the United States. Reactive language is exclusionary. It partitions this community as set apart, holy, and pure. Purity then is expressed

in work of ideological terraforming, of building a nostalgic world – digital and analogue – from the ground up. Panic over social norms and fears over potential persecution are imbricated within the historical layers of the long American project of conservative Christian domination. Reactive Orthodox Christians in the United States reimagine these historical projects, both through the politicization of Russian Orthodoxy in the Western context and in the radical reconceptualization of American social worlds.

* * *

SARAH RICCARDI-SWARTZ is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Northeastern University, USA. Email: s.riccardi-swartz@northeastern.edu

Bibliography

Albuquerque, Ana Luiza. 2023. "Hungary's Plan to Build an Army of U.S. Intellectuals." *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2023. https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/19/hungary-american-conservative-right-wing-intellectuals-orban/.

Antonov, Mikhail. 2020. "Church-State Symphonia: Its Historical Development and Its Applications by the Russian Orthodox Church." *Journal of Law and Religion* 35 (3): 474–93. https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2020.38.

Bhatia, Aditi. 2023. *Digital Influencers and Online Expertise: The Linguistic Power of Beauty Vloggers.* Routledge.

Bjork-James, Sophie. 2021. *The Divine Institution: White Evangelicalism's Politics of the Family.* Rutgers University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1982. *Ce que parler veur dire: l'économie des échanges linguistiques.* Fayard. [Modified translation: *Language and Symbolic Power*. Polity Press, 1991.]

Campbell, Heidi. 2010. *When Religion Meets New Media.* Routledge.

Church of the Eternal Logos. 2021. "The Trad Forum: Navigating Our Present Planning Our Future with Michael Sisco (June 12, Argos, IN)." Church of the Eternal Logos. April 2, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdNlhv-WSi8.

Clark, Anastasia, and Chris Bell. 2019. "Smartphone users warned to be careful of the Antichrist." BBC, January 8, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-46794556.

Dillingham, Rebecca. 2022. "We ain't Skeered. . . but They Are," Dissident Mama, February 12, 2022. http://www.dissidentmama.net/we-aint-skeered-but-they-are/.

Eisen, Norman L., and Tom Joscelyn. 2023. "Tucker Carlson, Viktor Orbán and the Anti-Democracy Playbook." *Just Security,* September 15, 2023. https://www.justsecurity.org/88319/tucker-carlson-viktor-orban-and-the-anti-democracy-playbook/.

Erickson, John H. 1999. *Orthodox Christians in America: A Short History*. Oxford Academic.

Hanganu, Gabriel. 2010. "Eastern Christians and Religious Objects: Personal and Material Biographies Entangled." In *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, edited by Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz. University of California Press.

Harkins, Anthony. 2003. *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon.* Oxford University Press.

Herbel, Oliver. 2014. *Turning to Tradition: Converts and the Making of an American Orthodox Church.* Oxford University Press.

Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan. 2021. "Introduction: Religion, Law, and Politics, American Style." In *At Home and Abroad: The Politics of American Religion*, edited by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan. Columbia University Press.

Ingersoll, Julie J. 2015. *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction.* Oxford University Press.

Keane, Webb. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter.* University of California Press.

Kitroeff, Alexander. 2020. *The Greek Orthodox Church in America: A Modern History.* Cornell University Pres.

Kravel-Tovi, Michal. 2023. "Making a Difference: The Political Life of Religious Conversion." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52: 19–37. https://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-101416

Kottasová, Ivana, and Anna Chernova. 2022. "Putin signs expanded anti-LGBTQ laws in Russia, in latest crackdown on rights." *CNN.* December 5, 2022. https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/05/europe/russia-lgbtq-propaganda-law-signed-by-putin-intl/index.html.

Levin, Dov H. 2020. *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions.* Oxford.

Lewis, David G. 2020. *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order.* Edinburgh University Press.

Lucas, Phillip Charles. 2003. "Enfants Terribles: The Challenge of Sectarian Converts to Ethnic Orthodox Churches in the United States." *Nova Religio* 7 (2): 5–23.

Moreton, Bethany. 2022. "The bond that explains why some on the Christian right support Putin's war." *The Washington Post.* March 5, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/05/bond-that-explains-why-some-christian-right-support-putins-war/.

Mudde, Cas. 2019. *The Far Right Today.* Wiley.

Riccardi-Swartz, Sarah. 2021a. "American Conservatives and the Allure of Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy." *Religions* 12 (12): e1036. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121036

Riccardi-Swartz, Sarah. 2021b. "Head Coverings, Vaccines, and Gender Politics: Contentious Topics among Orthodox Christian Women in US-based Digital Spaces." In *Women and Religiosity in Orthodox Christianity*, edited by Ina Merdjanova. New York: Fordham University Press.

Riccardi-Swartz, Sarah. 2021c. "Seeking a Sovereign for the End of Democracy: Monarchism and the Far Right." *Canopy Forum,* August 16, 2021. https://canopyforum.org/2021/08/10/seeking-a-sovereign-for-the-end-of-democracy-monarchism-and-the-far-right/.

Riccardi-Swartz, Sarah. 2022. *Between Heaven and Russian: Religious Conversion and Political Apostasy in Appalachia*. Fordham University Press.

Riccardi-Swartz, Sarah. 2023. "*Techno-theologoumena* and Rise of Far-Right Orthodox Internet Celebrities." *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 6 (2): 229–55. https://doi.org/10.1353/joc.2023.a935940.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Island Kingdom*. The University of Michigan Press.

Saler, Robert Cady. 2024.*"Death to the World" and Apocalyptic Theological Aesthetics.* Bloomsbury.

Sedgwick, Mark. 2023. *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order.* Oxford University Press.

Shekhovtsov, Anton. 2018. *Russian and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir.* Routledge.

Slagle, Amy. 2011. *The Eastern Church in the Spiritual Marketplace: American Conversions to Orthodox Christianity.* Dekalb Northern Illinois University Press.

Southern Poverty Law Center. 2007. "Report: 12 Anti-Semitic Radical Traditionalist Catholic Groups." January 16, 2007. https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/12-anti-semitic-radical-traditionalist-catholic-groups/.

Tashman, Brian. 2013. "World Congress of Families Praises Russian Laws 'Preventing Gays from Corrupting Children." *Right Wing Watch*. https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/world-congress-of-families-praises-russian-laws-preventing-gays-from-corrupting-children/.

Van Herpen, Marcel H. 2013. *Putinism: The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Weber, Max. (1905) 1930. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Translated by Talcott Parsons and Anthony Giddens. Unwin Hyman.

Wilson, Andrew. 2023. *Political Technology: The Globalisation of Political Manipulation*. Cambridge.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2018. *Disappointment: Toward a Critical Hermeneutics of World-building*. Fordham University Press.