

Berkley Forum

*Global Orthodoxy and the
Challenge of Internal Pluralism
and Conflict*

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Religious pluralism is often understood as a challenge that emerges from encounters between different religions. In societies shaped by globalization, migration, and digital communication, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists increasingly live side by side. Theological reflection on religious pluralism has therefore traditionally focused on how religions understand and relate to one another: whether they regard other faiths as false, complementary, or equally valid.

Yet pluralism is not only a matter of relations between religions. An expanded understanding of religious pluralism also includes the relationship between religion and non-religion. In modern secular societies, religious believers live alongside those who do not share religious beliefs, practices, or forms of belonging. Here, the central question is not the relationship between one faith and another, but between the religious community and the secular world beyond it.

Christian theological reflection has responded to this condition in different ways. Some traditions have understood secularization as a threat to faith and moral order, framing modernity as a story of decline and loss. Others have interpreted religious freedom and the autonomy of the secular sphere as conditions that make authentic faith possible, even as elements of a divine plan. In both cases, however, secularization has transformed the experience of religious life by making religious commitment one option among many rather than an unquestioned social fact (Charles Taylor's "default option" in [A Secular Age](#)).

The case of Orthodox Christianity suggests that yet another dimension of religious pluralism deserves attention. Today, some of the most significant challenges arise not between religions, but within them. Contemporary Orthodoxy offers a striking example of how long-standing internal differences can turn into visible and contentious cleavages. While theological, cultural, and political diversity have always existed in the Orthodox world, recent events have brought these differences into sharp light, revealing deep divisions.

When the [V-Theo](#) project was launched in 2022, it set out to explore how religious traditions respond to increasing diversity, how they understand religious pluralism, and how they balance claims to universal truth with practices of dialogue, tolerance, and inclusion. These questions were particularly relevant for Orthodox Christianity, a tradition often perceived as driven by nationalist, inward-looking orientations, yet increasingly confronted with the realities of globalization, migration, and religious pluralism.

Almost immediately, however, the Orthodox section of the project found itself grappling with a new, urgent question. In February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, triggering the largest war on European soil since the Second World War. The conflict involved two countries with Orthodox Christian majorities and quickly generated profound ecclesiastical, theological, and political repercussions across the Orthodox world. As a result, our discussions of pluralism became inseparable from questions of church unity, authority, and intra-Orthodox conflict.

In March 2022, more than 1,500 Orthodox theologians and clergy from around the world signed the "[Declaration on the Russian World \(Russkii Mir\) Teaching](#)," which denounced the ideology underpinning the Moscow Patriarchate's support for the war as a form of heresy. The Patriarch of Moscow, on the other side, blessed the war-effort and [legitimized it as a "holy war."](#) As theology became entangled with geopolitical conflict, the stakes of our debates increased dramatically. Participants in our workshops and conferences were no longer merely observing developments within global Orthodoxy; increasingly,

they found themselves situated within the very cleavages we were seeking to understand.

One publication published early on in this process in Russia was particularly revealing of the unfolding dynamics. A [volume](#) published under the direction of Alexander Shchipkov sought to document what its authors describe as a “coordinated Western campaign against the Russian Orthodox Church.” Among the institutions discussed were Fordham University's Orthodox Christian Studies Center, the online platform Public Orthodoxy, human rights initiatives, academic research projects, philanthropic foundations, and individual scholars, including participants in the V-Theo project. Rather than engaging primarily with the substance of theological and scholarly arguments, the volume reconstructed a network of institutional relationships linking scholars, universities, foundations, and academic events. The underlying assumption—and this became very clear in the publication—was that intellectual positions critical of the Moscow Patriarchate represented a coordinated ideological and geopolitical project.

By portraying their opponents as politically motivated, externally steered, and geopolitically compromised, the authors of the Russian volume presented their own position as natural, non-political, and independent. Yet from the perspective of those they criticize, it is precisely those active inside the Moscow Patriarchate today that are compromised by proximity to state power and alignment with Russian geopolitical interests.

Publications such as this invite readers into a mirror game in which each side sees itself as defending authentic Orthodoxy

while viewing the other as captured by external forces. It is important not to lose one's bearings in this game of mirrors, but neither should one imagine that it is possible simply to step outside it and remain aloof. For scholars and protagonists of contemporary Orthodoxy the challenge is to understand how these mirror games emerge, why they resonate, and what they reveal about the growing internal diversity and tensions within the global Orthodox world. The challenge is also to articulate one's own position within this contested space and, in doing so, help others avoid losing their orientation.

The workshops and conferences organized within the framework of V-Theo have reflected this challenge throughout. From a [workshop](#) in Volos in January 2023 to a [conference](#) held at Luiss University in Rome in May 2024, the conversation turned to inner-Orthodox cleavages, including the rivalry between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate, competing theological interpretations of war and peace, tensions between church hierarchies and laity, and the emergence of divergent visions of Orthodox identity.

This year's [European Academy of Religion conference in Rome](#) offered a glimpse of how these questions have evolved. Several panels addressed precisely the tensions that have emerged as central concerns within global Orthodoxy.

The Ukrainian case illustrates perhaps most clearly that question of pluralism and ecclesial identity are matters of immediate political and institutional consequence. The existence of two Orthodox churches in one country—the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)—

has generated intense disputes over legitimacy, recognition, and belonging. The war has deepened these tensions. The UOC's historical ties to the Moscow Patriarchate have exposed it to growing public suspicion and legal scrutiny, while the OCU has sought to consolidate its position as the national Orthodox Church of an independent Ukraine. These questions are at the center of the panel "Challenges and Crisis among the Ukrainian Churches—and Ways Forward for Global Orthodoxy," which brings together church representatives, scholars, and public intellectuals to discuss the future of Orthodoxy in Ukraine.

At the same time, another panel, "Religious Communities under Pressure: Documenting Religious Persecution in Russia, 2022–2025," examines a different but closely related dimension of the crisis. The panel focuses on the persecution of religious actors inside Russia that have opposed or refused to support the war, highlighting how mechanisms of state repression increasingly intersect with ecclesiastical structures.

Taken together, these discussions demonstrate how far the study of pluralism within Orthodoxy has moved beyond traditional questions of interreligious dialogue or theological openness to other faiths. The most pressing questions today concern how Orthodox Christians negotiate profound disagreements among themselves over war and peace, church and state, democracy and authoritarianism, national identity, and belonging to one Orthodox Church.

About the Author



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Kristina Stoeckl is a professor of sociology at LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome. Previously, she was an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology at the University of Innsbruck and principal investigator of the project "Postsecular Conflicts." Her publications include, among others, "The Legacy of Pitirim Sorokin in the Transnational Alliances of Moral Conservatives" in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (2017, with Dmitry Uzlaner) and *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights* (2014).

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