

Book Review:

Kevin Schembri,

Oikonomia, Divorce and Remarriage in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2017, 336 pp.,

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This book is a substantial contribution to the study of Eastern Orthodox Canon Law. Rev Kevin Schembri examines the historical and canonical background of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the Christian East, opening this tradition to the Western scholar, and producing a study that can be useful to students as well as researchers.

The first chapter of the book starts with a thorough examination of the background of marriage in the Jewish, the Greek and the Roman tradition, describing the legal and the social context in which the significance of marriage developed in the early Church. Schembri proceeds with an analysis of the theology of marriage, its liturgical development and symbolism, and concludes this chapter presenting the development of the canonical tradition on marriage. Schembri draws extensively on the Greek Fathers, but, careful to his subject matter, he makes sure to take into account the way they are read by modern Orthodox theologians. Therefore, views that are expressed in the writings of Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom are presented in continuity with the views of theologians such as Harakas, Trembelas, or Evdokimov. Had that not been the case, the book might claim to be an examination of the Patristic roots of the spirituality of marriage, but not of the Eastern Orthodox view on the subject.

One of the special virtues of Schembri's book is that it tries to approach Eastern Orthodoxy not simply as a *tradition*, that is, as a historically conditioned attitude that may be traced in time, but as a different way of thought. To this

effect, the second chapter of the book, dedicated to the analysis of “Akriveia” and “Oikonomia” (that may be roughly translated as ‘Strictness and Dispensation’ in terms of the application of Canon Law) goes beyond the level of historical information, and tries to present not just the pastoral practice of the Christian East, but, as much as this is possible, the pastoral instinct that seems to guide this practice and the interpretation of the written canonical tradition. Schembri relies on the theological distinction (or complementarity) between *akriveia* and *oikonomia* as it may be appreciated beyond the pastoral practice, citing systematic attempts to explain their purpose and function, as well as historical examples. This chapter can, on its own, be a useful introduction to the concept of *akriveia* and *oikonomia* to the Western student and researcher.

In the third chapter Schembri seems to be motivated by what initially appears as a difference between Eastern and Western Christian practices, and examines the question of the indissolubility of marriage (which usually is associated with the Roman Catholic understanding of marriage) in the East. Here the author presents the spiritual foundation of marriage as it is understood in the East, and argues convincingly that the same principle of the indissolubility of marriage is found in the East. Following this, in the fourth chapter, Schembri also describes the theological foundation and the pastoral circumstances that allowed the Orthodox Church to adopt a flexible policy on the matter of divorce and successive marriages. His research also shows how marriages of lay and clergy are treated differently.

The book concludes with a wider appreciation of the Eastern Christian tradition, and how its approach, including its differences from Western practices, may be taken in the context of a theological and pastoral dialogue. This is a very constructive ecumenical approach, and it could work with several areas of what may become a series of constructive differences between the two Churches.

Overall, this is a book that uses solid scholarship to examine its subject as closely as possible. Although there are several studies of the spirituality of marriage, it is hard to find a similar book, in terms of the description of the spiritual and legal context of marriage, and also the way it is understood beyond the letter of the law in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

While the focus of this book is clear, and it delivers what it promises, further directions of the theology and the canonical examination of the Eastern Orthodox tradition could include an evaluation of the eschatological dimension of marriage, such as it appears in G. Patronos’s *Marriage in Theology and in Life* (Athens: 1981), which would have been useful even for this volume, and also an examination of the present dialogue concerning marriage and love in

the Orthodox tradition. Much of this may be found in the work of Christos Yannaras - especially, but not exclusively in his *Variation on the Song of Songs* (Athens: 1990) - but it is also part of a wider dialogue on anthropology, an area that Orthodox theology tries to examine actively. Yet, much of this dialogue is not limited to the spirituality or the Patristic background of the Orthodox tradition, but it also addresses points of Canon Law, such as Sotiris Mitralaxis: "A Return to Tradition: The Marriage of Bishops in the (Greek) Orthodox Church," in the *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 7:4 (2016), 205–218.

Finally, Schembri wrote his book before the Panorthodox Council of 2016, but he certainly kept an eye to the preconiliar activity. While the Council was expected to look into the question of marriage in the Orthodox tradition in a theological depth that would allow it to address urgent pastoral questions such as mixed marriages today, and second marriages of divorced or widowed priests, it failed to do so. The failure itself however, could be an indication of the need for a much more rigorous examination in the area of the Orthodox spirituality of marriage, and its reflection on Canon Law. Nevertheless, the book of Rev Kevin Schembri will certainly be a valuable asset for anyone who would like to take a good look at the past, before we venture into the future.

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