

“Orthodox Church Today:” New Research Reveals Some “Not-So-Obvious” Facts about American Orthodox Christianity

The “Orthodox Church Today” study released by the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute (Graduate Theological Union) disproves many stereotypes and provides groundbreaking insights into the life of one of the least known American faith traditions – Orthodox Christianity.

With its historical roots in nineteenth century Russian Alaska, today Orthodox Christianity in the USA accounts for about 1,200,000 – 1,300,000 faithful worshipping in 2,200 – 2,300 local parishes (congregations) spread all across the nation. There is no single “American Orthodox Church:” Orthodox Christians in America belong to nearly twenty different Orthodox Churches or “jurisdictions” – the word Orthodox use instead of Protestant “denominations.” The “Orthodox Church Today” is the first national survey-based study of the ordinary parishioners in the two largest Orthodox Christian Churches in America: the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA) and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA).

Here are some interesting facts about the American Orthodox Christian community.

1) The common stereotype is that the Orthodox Churches in the USA are “ethnic” Churches of certain immigrant communities. The study shows that this not the case anymore. **Nine out of ten parishioners in both GOA and OCA are American-born.** Further, today, more than one-quarter (29%) of the GOA and a majority of OCA (51%) members are converts to Orthodoxy – persons born and raised either Protestants or Roman Catholics.

2) **Not all Orthodox are equally “Orthodox.”** The study found that the gaps between the “left” and the “right” wings in American Orthodoxy are wide and that American Orthodox Christians are deeply divided among themselves in their personal “micro-theologies.” Answering the question “When you think about your theological position and approach to church life, which word best describes where you stand?” the relative majority (41%) of church members preferred to be in the safe “middle” and described their theological stance and approach to church life as “traditional.” At the same time, quite sizeable factions identified themselves as being either “conservative” (28%) or “moderate-liberal” (31%).

3) Orthodox Christians have a strong sense of their religious identity and clear preference for the Orthodox Church. **Nine in ten parishioners said that they “cannot imagine being anything but Orthodox.”** For an overwhelming majority of parishioners, “Christianity” essentially means “Orthodox Christianity.” Indeed, eight

out of ten respondents think that “there is one best and true interpretation of the meaning of the Christian faith and the Orthodox Church comes closest to teaching it.” The study compared GOA and OCA members with the US Roman Catholics and found that in various measures American Orthodox Christians adhere more strongly to their Church than do Roman Catholics.

4) The strong Orthodox identity does not mean that “people in the pews” view their religious obligations exactly the way it is expected by the institutional Church. In reality, most parishioners make personal choices among various norms of Church life, holding firmly to what is central for their faith and approaching the rest as desirable but not crucial. The beliefs in Jesus’ resurrection and actual presence in Eucharist are perceived by the Orthodox laity as the most fundamental criteria of being a “good Orthodox Christian.” To the contrary, **regular Church attendance, obeying the priest and observing Great Lent are seen by majority of parishioners as non-essential for being a “good Orthodox Christian.”**

5) **Only three in ten parishioners would support women being altar servers or deacons, and only one in ten think that women should be eligible to the Orthodox priesthood.** It is a historical fact that in the past the Orthodox Church had a female deaconate which “died out” in the Middle Ages. Today, however, a vast majority of American Orthodox Christians do not favor the idea of the ordination of women. Male and female respondents expressed the same opinions on the ordination of women.

6) **More than two-thirds of the respondents say that they wanted to belong to parishes that “require uniformity of belief and practice and where people hold the same views.”** That is, American Orthodox Christians have quite different (“liberal-moderate,” “traditional,” “conservative”) personal approaches to Church life, but they prefer homogenous “like-minded” parishes. Only one in four respondents favor “big-tent parishes that tolerate diversity of beliefs and practices, where people hold different views and openly discuss their disagreements.”

7) **Orthodox Christians have various opinions on compatibility of evolutionism and creationism.** With regard to public education, American Orthodox laity are divided in three almost equal groups: those who favor teaching creationism instead of evolution in American public schools (33%), those who reject this idea (35%) and those who are unable to take one or other stand on this matter (32%). Almost equal proportions of them either agreed (41%) or disagreed (38%) with the statement “Evolutionary theory is compatible with the idea of God as Creator.” More than one-fifth (21%) of respondents were unable to evaluate this statement and said that they are “Neutral or unsure.”

8) Being a professional clergyman in 21st century America is, probably, not seen as a “dream choice” of occupation by most people. Yet, the study found that **more than three quarters of the respondents “would encourage their sons to become priests.”**

Combined, the GOA and the OCA account for more than half of all Orthodox Christians and parishes in the USA. Therefore, to a significant degree the study reflects the “profile” of the American Orthodox community at large. Respondents from more than 100 randomly selected Orthodox parishes situated in the various parts of the country participated in the survey. The questionnaire focused on personal social and religious attitudes of Orthodox parishioners and on the patterns of the everyday church life in their local parishes. Special attention was paid to the “image” of the Orthodox clergy through the eyes of the “people in the pews” and to the issues dealing with “Democracy and Pluralism in the Church,” “Changes and Innovations in the Church,” and “Religious ‘Particularism’ and Ecumenism.” Numerous comparisons with the US Roman Catholics and Protestants make study results especially interesting for the wider audience.

Downloadable copies of the complete “Orthodox Church Today” study report are available on the web-site of the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute at: <http://www.orthodoxinstitute.org/orthodoxchurchtoday.html>

For more information on this study or to schedule media interview with the principal researcher, contact:

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About Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute (PAOI). PAOI is an affiliate member of the Graduate Theological Union, an ecumenical consortium of nine independent seminaries and eight affiliated centers based in Berkeley, California. PAOI exists to educate, communicate and promote the traditions and culture of Orthodox Christianity. The Institute’s major programs include:

- Two-year Master of Arts in Orthodox Studies – the only graduate program in Orthodox Studies in the United States west of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania and the only one not offered by an Orthodox seminary;
- InterOrthodoxPress publishing company;
- Parish Life Project – an ongoing program to study the inner realities of the Orthodox Church life in the US through sociological surveys and other research methods.

For more on PAOI, see www.orthodoxinstitute.org or write paoi@ses.gtu.edu or call 510-649-3450.