

WEB REVIEW: *Monachos.net—Orthodoxy Through Patristic, Monastic, and Liturgical Study* • <http://www.monachos.net>

By Juliet Crawford Schwab

Eastern Orthodoxy has a rich historical, theological, liturgical, and artistic tradition that remains unfamiliar to many western Christians. Entering the world of Orthodoxy can be daunting for those who lack the linguistic skills and the patience to encounter a beautiful but alien world. Monachos.net, a freely available website “dedicated to the study of Orthodox Christianity through its patristic, monastic and liturgical heritage,” provides inquirers, scholars, and Orthodox faithful with an abundance of Orthodox resources. The site is maintained by Irenaeus (M.C.) Steenberg, an Orthodox scholar and former Oxford professor, currently principal of St. John of San Francisco Orthodox Academy and visiting scholar at Santa Clara University. An established resource for Eastern Orthodox studies, the site celebrated its tenth anniversary on September 1, 2010.

A first-time visitor to the website will note its visually pleasing layout and overall ease of use. The luminous iconographic imagery of the Eastern Orthodox Church is put to use in the banner, as menu icons, and on individual pages to capture the user’s attention and break up tedious blocks of text. A menu bar at the top of the page directs the user to sections on Patristics, Monasticism, Liturgics, Community (the discussion forum), Special Features, and News. When the cursor is placed over each menu option, submenus pop up to provide more specific direction. There is also a Google-powered search box in the top menu.

The Patristic area offers several approaches to the study of early Christianity. The Patristics Texts include a master list of source texts in translation by Greek, Latin, and Syriac fathers, organized and searchable by author. Many of the texts are hosted offsite, making this a convenient first stop for an aggregate search of online patristic texts. While extensive, the list is not searchable by any other criteria than author (e.g., title or subject), and there seems to be no governing principle for inclusion other than what the site’s volunteers have translated or what is available on other websites. Nonetheless, since there are a number of patristic texts on the web but no easy way to search all of them at once, this is a valuable resource.

A useful feature in the Patristic area is its topical Studies on Patristic Themes and issues and studies on Specific Fathers. In particular, this is a good place to begin research on the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries: a Christology study area contains a background on the controversies and the schools of Alexandria and Antioch, key personalities of the era, the proceedings of the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, and information on the aftermath of the councils, including modern attempts at rapprochement. Unfortunately, this section is difficult to navigate and is not fully developed, as not all topics listed are linked to content, but the existing essays are clear and concise introductions to a complex controversy. The studies on specific fathers include introductions to figures often overlooked in western-centered history and theology courses—for example, Gregory Palamas and Symeon the New Theologian—as well as more well-known theologians such as Athanasius and Origen. Some essays are overviews, while others address specific questions such as Gregory of Nyssa’s concept of the “divine darkness” or Origen’s universalism. Essays on topics and individuals include bibliographies listing texts (both original language and English) and modern studies.

Juliet Crawford Schwab is a student at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York.

An introduction to the Monasticism section describes the monastic life as “very centre and heart of the Church” and includes tabbed links to pages devoted to studies on monasticism, monastic spirituality, and Mount Athos (a section on the Jesus Prayer is forthcoming). While less extensive than the section on patristics, the essays on monasticism and monastic spirituality cover the origins and motivations of monasticism; prayer, celibacy, and asceticism; and more specialized studies such as an essay on John Cassian’s westward expansion of eastern monasticism. The section on Mt. Athos includes guidelines for visiting, and pictures and pilgrim accounts for those who are only able to experience the holy mountain vicariously.

A section on Liturgics includes texts for seasonal liturgies for Great Lent and Pascha, as well as texts, prayers, and hymns drawn from other parts of the liturgy. There are studies on the homily and the Eucharist in the pastoral theology of St. John Chrysostom, early Christian and Byzantine music, and images of the cross in the Old Testament drawn from the liturgy of the Veneration of the Cross. This area of the site also contains a dictionary of Orthodox terminology, although given its general coverage, it might be better placed elsewhere.

Other features of the website include an active discussion forum broken down into quite granular subtopics; a catalogue of offsite links (more impressive in its breadth than its depth), a topically organized wiki page of patristic quotations, and a news page featuring new additions to the website, which also allows the reader to subscribe to an RSS feed or to an e-mail newsletter. The news page shows recent additions, indicating that while some sections of the site may be incomplete, it is frequently updated. Those who are deeply interested in Eastern Orthodoxy, especially those who wish to dialogue with others of like interest (with the awareness that such discussions may well take an apologetic bent), will find plenty of material to occupy them on this site.

In addition to the issues with content that is listed on the site but not fully linked or developed, there are other functional glitches. Some links, such as pictures or texts from outside sites, open in “lightbox screens” that can’t be viewed entirely on small-resolution monitors. Right-clicking on these links to open them in a new tab or window resolves the problem. Other links go nowhere at all—while a “Monasteries in North America” tab appears under the main menu, clicking on the Introduction or Listings leads to an error page. The Beta Testing page under the Special Features menu provides a list of known issues as well as a link to the area of the discussion forum where users may report bugs and give feedback.

Regardless of these minor faults, this is a richly informative and well-designed site created by a knowledgeable scholar and supported by a lively and passionate community of users. While its intent is unapologetically devotional, it nonetheless takes a scholarly approach and will provide the careful student with introductory resources for academic research. Theological librarians will want to include it in electronic bibliographies on Eastern Orthodoxy and recommend it to students in courses on patristics, Christian spirituality, and the Eastern Church. The resources available on this site serve as an excellent introduction to Orthodox theology, monasticism, and liturgy, and should furnish students with tools for further inquiry.

