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The Power of Micro-Theology: How “Liberal,” “Moderate,” “Traditional” and “Conservative” Eastern Orthodox Priests Shape the Lives of their Parishes.

I. Context

Since the 1970s, scholars of religion in the US have been increasingly focused on the “conservative-liberal” divides in the American religious landscape. Some scholars investigated theologically based divisions within particular Christian denominations (Ammerman 1990; Hadaway 1980; Kniss 1997; Weston 1997; Wood 2004) or within non-Christian faith communities (Lazerwitz 1998; Wertheimer 1993). Others analyzed conservative-liberal discords across denominational or even across religious borders by looking at particular subjects such as educational attainment (Beyerlein 2004; Darnell et al. 1997), politics (Layman 2001; Leege et al. 2002; Miller and Shanks 1996), feminism (Manning 1999), women’s place in a church (Chaves 1997), church-giving (Hoge et al. 1996), family issues (Browning 1997; Bartkowski 2001), homosexuality (Thumma and Gray 2005), etc.

In spite of this growing interest to the subject of conservative-liberal divides within and across denominations, American Eastern Orthodox Christianity is still seen as an essentially homogeneous religious tradition. Most scholars and wider audiences alike treat the Eastern Orthodox Churches in the US in monolithic terms. According to Vrame (2008, forthcoming), this is an accurate depiction in terms of Orthodox doctrine and also in terms of Orthodox “macro-theology” that is historical, patristic, biblical, and liturgical scholarly inquiries on “big questions.” At the same time, there exists a growing diversity in “micro-theology” across American Orthodox jurisdictions (denominations) and among their local congregations (parishes). Based on their personal varied understandings of Orthodox doctrine and traditions and interpreting them differently in the context of American mainstream culture, clergy and laity alike organize the lives of their parishes, and interact with the outside (non-Orthodox) community in very different ways. These diverse lived expressions of Orthodox Christianity are expressions of what we call “orthopraxy.” Thus, orthopraxy is observable behavior of Orthodox Christians and communities (parish, monastery, diocese, etc.) as it relates to the lived expression of Orthodox Tradition. It is observable “way of life” – the practices of Orthodox Christians and communities, including but not limited to liturgical practices, fasting practices, and patterns of social relations, engagement and involvement. To call these practices “ortho” in this definition is to describe what is perceived as correct practice (“ortho” = true, correct, upright).

It was not until recently that the Orthodox theologians have begun to notice the growing conservative-liberal gap (Whitesides, 1997) and increasing fragmentation (Papanikolau, 2008, forthcoming) among American Eastern Orthodox Churches. No systematic research has been done to examine how Orthodox teachings and established traditions are personally or communally interpreted and how these varied interpretations shape the culture of the local Orthodox Christian congregations.

II. Problem Addressed and Research Approach

In his book *God's Potters*, Jackson Carroll views the clergy as the producers of a congregational culture who “give shape to a congregation’s particular way of being a congregation – that is, to the beliefs and practices characteristic of a particular community’s life and ministry.” (Carroll, 2006, 25). In this regard, very little has been done so far to examine broad patterns and trends in the American Orthodox priesthood. The study “Evolving Visions of the Orthodox Priesthood in America” completed by the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute (www.orthodoxinstitute.org) in the spring-summer of 2006 was designed to address general question: “Who are American Orthodox clergy in the beginning of the third millennium?” The full study report is available at: <http://www.orthodoxinstitute.org/files/evolvisstudrepwebpost.pdf>. The data were collected through a mail survey of nationally representative sample of priests in two American Orthodox jurisdictions (denominations): the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America (GOA) and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA). The questionnaires were sent to all parish clergy in the GOA’ Metropolises of Chicago and San Francisco and in the OCA’ Dioceses of the West and Midwest. The overall response rate was 88%.

One of the goals of “Evolving Visions...” study was the elaboration the types of “orthopraxy” among Orthodox parish priests. Four types of orthopraxy have been originally proposed by Vrame (Vrame, 2008, forthcoming). They are based on the degree of willingness of Orthodox clergy to accept changes and innovations in church life and to adapt to the realities of a culturally and religiously pluralistic American society:

- *Conservative (Fundamentalist) Orthopraxy*. It rejects changes and emphasizes the exactness of once and forever developed practices in spite of changing local contexts. It also separates itself deliberately from the mainstream American culture.
- *Traditional Orthopraxy*. It strives to observe Orthodox tradition and cherishes church heritage immensely, but accepts evolutionary changes, permitting praxis to evolve slowly over time.

- *Moderate (Reform) Orthopraxy.* It supports intentional changes and is willing to “fit in” and be “accepted” by the wider American society and by mainstream American religious life.
- *Liberal (Reconstructionist) Orthopraxy.* It seeks to introduce “innovative” practices, to generally “rethink” orthopraxy and to develop a new expression of Orthodox Christianity for America.

The usage of clergy attitudes towards *changes and innovations* in church life as major criteria in creating typologies of orthopraxy in America is not incidental. Indeed, the commonly shared perception held, even by Orthodox, is that Orthodox Christianity praises strong adherence to tradition and emphasizes continuity and stability in the Church life. In short, Orthodox Christianity is perceived as unchanging or never having changed. Generally, innovations in the Orthodox Church are accepted rather grudgingly and only if proven absolutely necessary and approved properly by Church hierarchy. This distinct feature of Orthodox Christianity can be seen both as its strength and, at the same time, as its major challenge. Both in the “Old World” and in America, the Orthodox Churches are struggling with the same dilemmas:

- how to keep a proper balance between established traditions and norms of church life and dynamically changing social realities?
- how to meet the changing expectations (or even demands) of the new generations of their faithful without compromising fundamental principles and rules?
- how to adapt the assumingly Orthodox universal traditions and rules to the various local circumstances in which Orthodox Church functions?

The goal of reconciling old traditions with changing social realities and with different local contexts proved to be especially difficult for the Eastern Orthodox Churches in the US for three reasons.

First, Orthodox Christianity in the US is a minority religious culture. Being a minority and in order to avoid social marginalization, the Orthodox community has in many ways to compromise and to comply with the mainstream American culture. In Church life, hierarchs, clergy and lay leaders alike cannot pretend that, for instance, the issues of ordination of women or of same sex marriage among the Church members are simply not present. The strong ethnic identity and the sense of close-knit community – both culturally and religiously distinct from the wider American society - were fundamental for the earlier generations of Orthodox believers in US. Accordingly, in the past, this helped American Orthodox Churches to maintain established patterns of church life, to avoid changes and to expect taken-for-granted obedience of their faithful. Today, when most of the Orthodox Christians in the US are third

or fourth generation Americans and when the strength of the ethno-cultural values and sentiments declined significantly, the Orthodox Churches cannot count anymore on this factor and on the unconditional loyalty of their members.

Second, religious pluralism has been historically one of the foundational principles upon which American society was built. As Peter Berger pointed out, the conditions of an ever-expanding market of religious options force all American churches to compete in retaining or gaining the adherence of a free-to-choose population. And this task has proved to be especially difficult for churches with a claim to exclusive authority or a history of relying on the state to enforce a religious monopoly which to a large degree was the case of Orthodox Christianity. On the level of individual religious consciousness, religious pluralism means the shift from religion as a taken-for-granted reality to religion as a matter of personal voluntary and deliberate choice (Berger 2003, p.34). Put differently, in America, it would be seen as socially perfectly acceptable for an Orthodox Christian person to abandon the Church which is unwilling to meet changing expectations and aspirations of the new generations of her faithful.

Third, notions of unquestionable hierarchical authority and highly centralized church administration are fundamental for the Orthodox Church. For a number of historic reasons, however, “congregationalism” has been always present in American Orthodox parishes. According to Fr. Tomas Hopko, “Orthodox parishes and dioceses in North America today are *voluntary associations* of like-minded Orthodox Christians organized for purposes *determined by their members*.” The reality is that “a parish belongs to the diocese of its choice, most often *on its own terms*.” (Hopko 2003, pp. 1-2). In addition, in many parts of the US, “congregationalism” and significant local autonomy of American Orthodox parishes are further augmented by significant geographic distances and by scant communications between them and their diocesan centers. Overall, in the US, individual Orthodox parishes have relative freedom in making local decisions about patterns of their social and religious lives and about either embracing certain innovations or avoiding any changes in the Church life.

Because of these circumstances, the personalities of the parish priests and their individual attitudes towards various Church matters and social issues play much greater role in shaping congregational culture of the local Orthodox parishes in America than in the Old World.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the above four types of orthopraxy among American Orthodox parish priests. This will be done by comparing attitudes of the clergy with different theological outlooks to the various aspects of the Orthodox parish life.

Two related questions are addressed: 1) Is there any relationship between the theological stance of the American Orthodox clergy and such characteristics as their age, religious upbringing, or denominational culture? 2) Compared to other personal characteristics, to which extent does an identification of clergy with more liberal or more conservative theological camps shape their approach to the issues of “Status of a Priest in a Parish,” “Democracy in the Church,” “Innovations in the Church,” and “Ecumenical Attitudes and Relations to the Outside Non-Orthodox Community?”

III. Findings

III A. Who Is in “Conservative-Traditional” and Who Is in “Liberal-Moderate” Clergy Camps?

The denominational cultures of two major (by the number of parishes and members) American Orthodox jurisdictions involved in our study – the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and the Orthodox Church in America – are in many ways different. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA) traces its origins to the waves of immigrants from Greece and Asia Minor (Turkey) in the earliest 20th century. With regard to church administration, GOA is an “eparchy,” that is a territory of Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. In practice, GOA has considerable freedom to arrange its internal local affairs, except election of bishops. To the outside observer, most notable characteristics of GOA would be sizeable parishes (GOA parishes average 1000-1100 members) and the obvious influence of Greek culture in parish life – even in communities of the 3rd and 4th generations. The Orthodox Church in America (OCA) traces its origin to the 18th century Russian missionary presence in Alaska (when it was a Russian colony). Similarly to GOA, OCA also experienced an immigrant surge in the early 20th century. The OCA is an “autocephalous” Orthodox Church, i.e. completely self-ruling and independent from any “Mother-Church” overseas. In comparison to the GOA, OCA parishes are small (with an average of 150 members), generally Slavic in cultural orientation, but with a high percentage of converts from the other (non-Orthodox) Christian Churches. In most OCA parishes, Slavic styles would be respected, but with a strong claim to an American identity.

Accordingly, the GOA and OCA clergy have significantly different cultural, ethnic and even religious backgrounds. First, GOA and OCA priesthood differ in degree of the presence of the converts from non-Orthodox Christian traditions. According to the survey, 59% of the OCA priests are converts in comparison with only 14% in case of GOA.

Table.1 What was your Church affiliation before you became Orthodox Christian? (% of priests)

	I have always been Orthodox Christian	I am a convert, including:	Former Catholics	Former Liberal Protest.	Former Moderate Protestant	Former Evangelical Protestant	Former Agnostics
GOA, %	86	14	6	0	3	4	1
OCA, %	41	59	20	3	12	18	6
Total, %	65	35	13	1	7	11	3

Second, GOA and OCA differ significantly by proportion of the priests who are first-generation immigrants to America. One quarter of the Greek Orthodox priests were born outside of the USA and Canada in comparison with only 10% among OCA clergy.

Table.2 Where you were born? (% of priests)

	USA, Canada	Greece, Middle East	Former USSR, Eastern Europe	Western Europe	Asia
GOA, %	75	20	4	0	1
OCA, %	90	0	6	4	0
Total, %	83	10	5	2	0

Finally, GOA and OCA clergy demonstrate various strength of their ethnic heritage. For instance, more than one third of the GOA priests (36%) say that their first “mother” language was not English in comparison with only 16% in the case of OCA clergy.

Table.3 What was your first “mother” language that you spoke at home as a child? (% of priests)

	English	Any other than English language
GOA, %	64	36
OCA, %	84	16
Total, %	74	26

In spite of these significant differences in the personal backgrounds of their clergy, two major American Orthodox jurisdictions are yet very similar by the proportion of priests who identified themselves as being either “conservative,” or “traditional,” or “moderate,” or “liberal.” See chart 1.

Chart 1. When you think about your theological position and approach to church life, which word best describes where you stand? (% of priests)

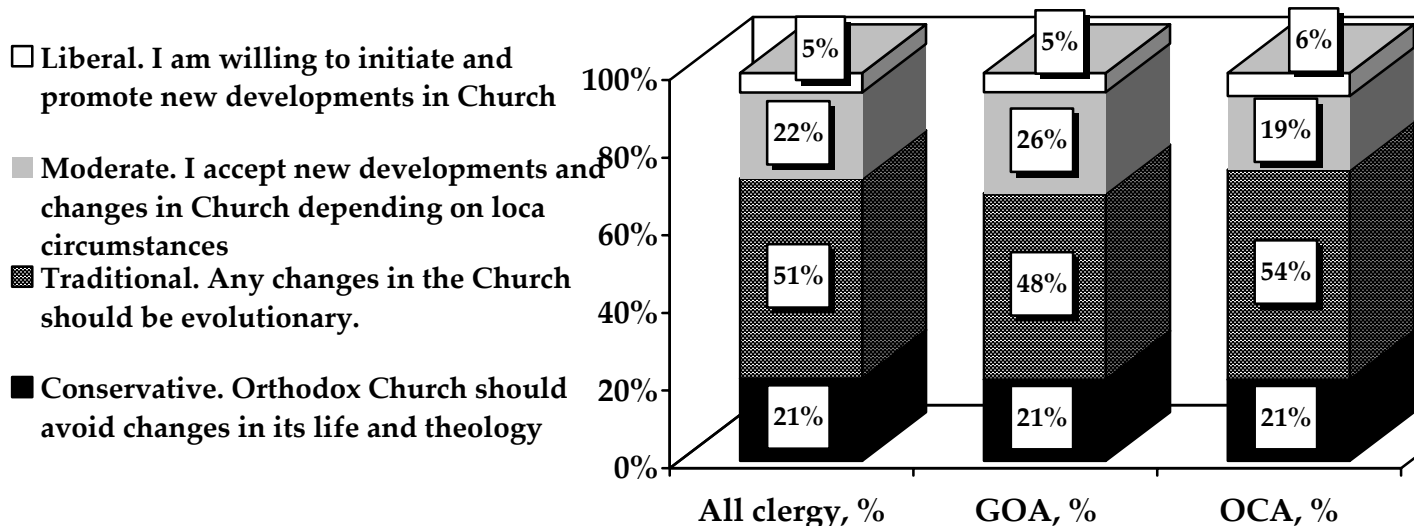
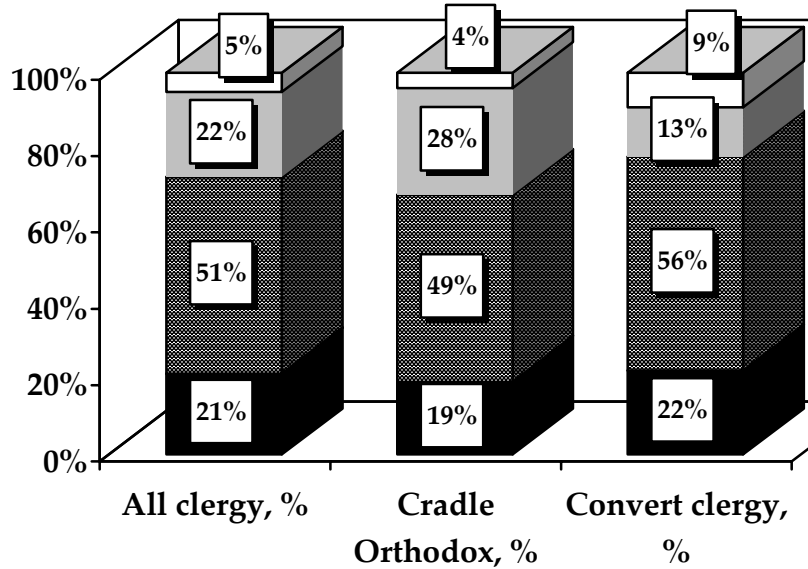


Chart 1 allows for two conclusions. First, it is clear that a “reform oriented” camp among American Orthodox clergy is relatively small in comparison with the much stronger group of the clergy who are keen to “keep the things the way they are.” Indeed, only 27% of the priests identified themselves as either liberal (5%) or moderate (22%) in comparison with almost three quarters (72%) of respondents who said they are traditional (51%) or conservative (21%). Second, we know from practical experience, that in the church politics the most radical groups on both sides of conservative-liberal spectrum are usually the most vocal ones. In this context, the survey results show that today radical “conservative” wing among American Orthodox clergy (21%) is significantly more numerous than the group of radical “liberals” (5%).

Further analysis revealed two more facts worth mentioning. First, we found that there is *no* statistically significant difference between cradle Orthodox and convert clergy in proportion of priests who belonged to either “conservative,” or “traditional,” or “moderate,” or “liberal” groups. See chart 2. This finding is significant, because it gives good insight into a subject which has been debated in American Orthodox churches for a considerable period: the hypothesis that American converts to Orthodoxy tend to be more conservative and “Orthodox” than the cradle Orthodox Christians. The results of the survey *do not support* this commonly shared stereotype: cradle Orthodox priests and convert priests are equally likely to be present in either “conservative-traditional” or “moderate-liberal” camps.

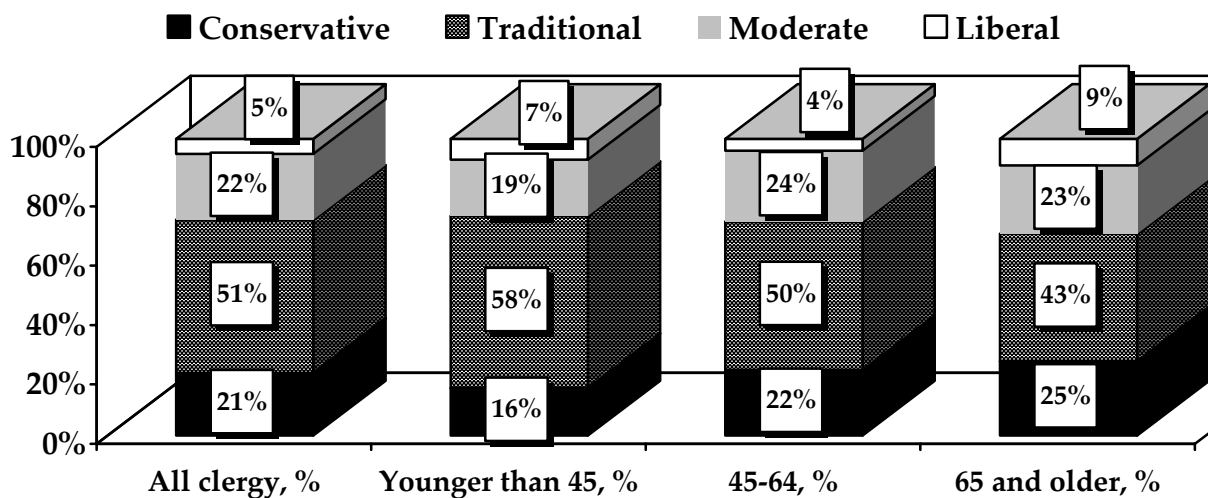
Chart 2. When you think about your theological position and approach to church life, which word best describes where you stand? (% of priests)

- Liberal. I am willing to initiate and promote new developments in Church
- Moderate. I accept new developments and changes in Church depending on local circumstances
- ▨ Traditional. Any changes in the Church should be evolutionary.
- Conservative. Orthodox Church should avoid changes in its life and theology



Second, the “liberal – conservative” differences among various generations of the priests are also statistically insignificant. See chart 3. In general, the younger, middle-aged and most senior priests are similar by proportions of persons who identify themselves with either “conservative – traditional” or “moderate – liberal” wings in the Church.

Chart 3. When you think about your theological position and approach to church life, which word best describes where you stand? (% of priests)



To conclude, the question “Who is in ‘Conservative-Traditional’ and who is in ‘Liberal-Moderate’ clergy camps?” cannot be easily and unambiguously answered.

Indeed, the survey data indicate that the fact that some clergy identify themselves as “liberal” or “moderate” while the others say that they are “traditional” or “conservative” is not related to priests’ age, or their religious upbringing, or their “denominational culture.” In other words, the younger and older clergy, the cradle Orthodox and convert priests, and the OCA and GOA clergy are equally likely to be found in either “conservative-traditional” or in “liberal-moderate” camps.

III B. Clergy’ Attitudes Towards Status of a Priest in the Parish

The questionnaire asked priests if they agree or disagree with three statements that explore the subject of the status of a parish priest. See Table 4.

Table 4. To which extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements? (% of priests)

	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Neutral, unsure	Rather disagree	Strongly disagree
Ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes priests ‘different’ from laity	27	34	9	21	9
The idea that priest is a man ‘set apart’ is a barrier to the full realization of true Christian community	6	15	19	31	29
Priests today need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues beyond their own parish’s level	17	42	20	15	6

The statements “Ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes priests ‘different’ from laity” and “The idea that priest is a man ‘set apart’ is a barrier to the full realization of true Christian community” deal with the same issue: how distinct is the status of a priest from the laity and how clear should be the borders between clergy and people in the pews. The responses to these statements tell us about clergy approaches to the theology of priesthood and which model of priesthood the clergy favor more: the “cultic model” or the “servant-leadership model.” Table 4 shows that a dominant majority of American Orthodox priests view themselves as “men set apart.” Indeed, 61% clergy agreed (either “strongly agreed” or “rather agreed”) with the statement “Ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes priests ‘different’ from laity” indicating that they believe that ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes them different from the laity. Conversely, only 21% of priests supported the statement “The idea that priest is a man ‘set apart’ is a barrier to the full realization of true Christian community,” thus expressing concern that this special distinct status is a hindrance in creating true Christian community. Clearly, the cultic model is dominant among American Orthodox priests.

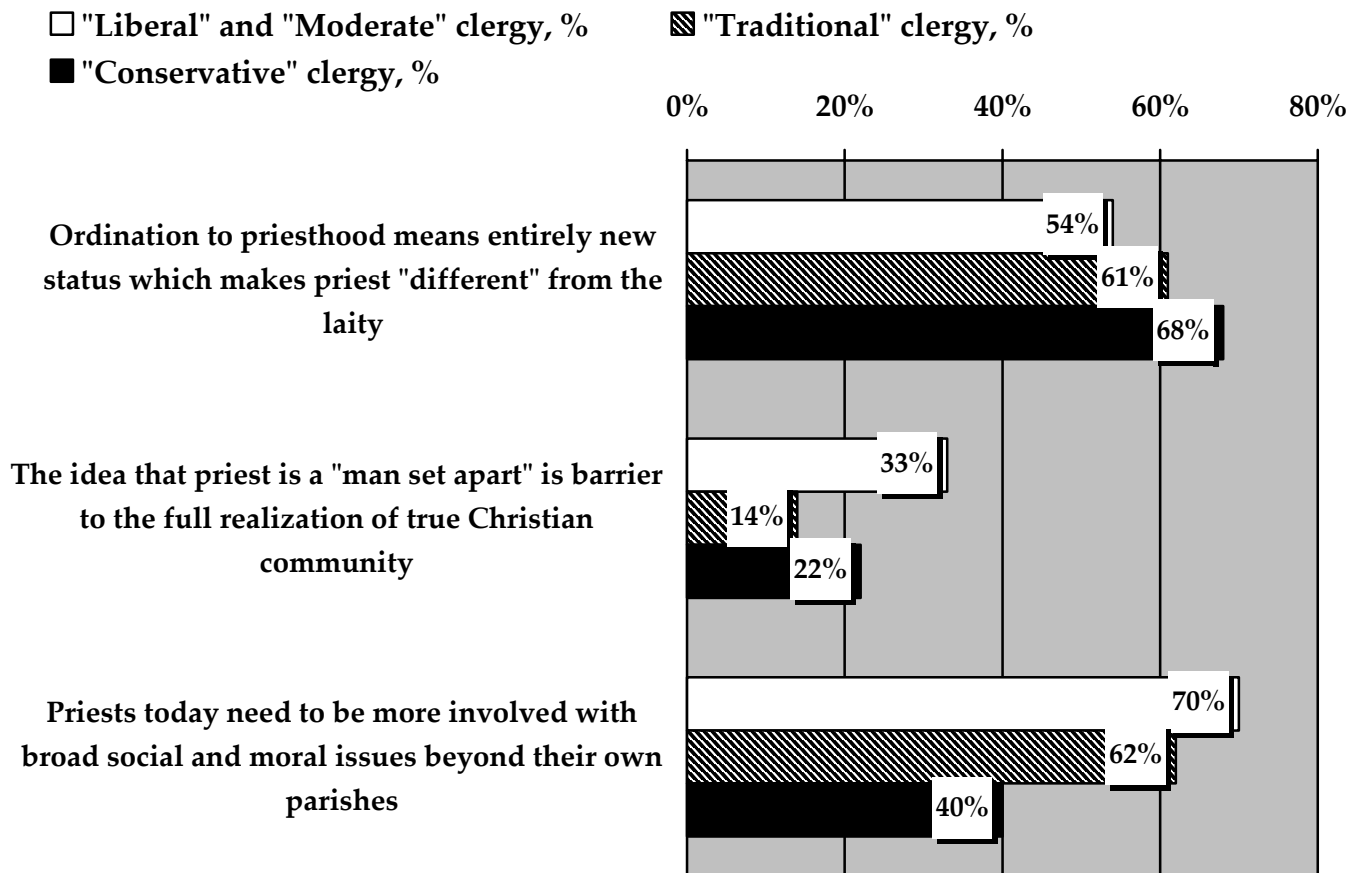
The third statement - “Priests today need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues beyond their own parish’s level” - examines clergy opinions on significance of the social ministry as a part of their priestly duties. 59% of the clergy agreed with this statement, and only 21% disagreed. It should be noted that this statement does not undermine the importance of the sacramental liturgical functions of the priesthood (which are essential for Orthodox Christianity), but suggests that clergy should also be socially involved. The fact that the majority of Orthodox clergy recognize significance of the social ministry is an important finding, because the idea of social ministry as an integral part of priestly vocation is relatively new for American Orthodox Churches. According to the national “Ministry in America” study published in 1980, the Orthodox clergy identified most completely with the “sacramental–liturgical model” of priesthood. In this model, clergy were called to have a *singular focus* on the transcendent and holy: on leading sacramental worship, providing communion, and teaching. At that time, counseling, social outreach and the development of community services were subtly disregarded or even discouraged in many American Orthodox parishes (Harakas 1980).

There was no significant difference between GOA and OCA clergy in their responses to the three statements in Table 4. In other words, the GOA and OCA priests have similar theological attitudes to the status of the parish priest. We also analyzed and compared responses of clergy in three various age categories: younger than 45, 45-64, and 65 years and older. There was no significant difference among clergy of various ages in degree of their agreement with seven statements about status of priesthood. Finally, there was only one significant distinction in the attitudes to the status of priesthood between cradle Orthodox and convert clergy. Many more cradle Orthodox than convert priests agreed that “Priests today need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues beyond their own parish’s level:” 68% and 44% respectively. In other words, while convert clergy adhere more to an older, single-focused sacramental-liturgical model of priesthood, the cradle Orthodox clergy are the major proponents of the mainstreaming of the Orthodox priesthood in the USA by voicing the idea of the broader social involvement of the priests.

Summing up, the survey data tell us that “denominational culture,” the age and the religious upbringing of clergy have no influence on their opinions about the status of an Orthodox parish priest. Quite differently, the theological position of clergy – their identification with either “conservative-traditional” or “moderate-liberal” group - is an influential factor and strong predictor for clergy attitudes to the status of priesthood.

Chart 4 shows the degree of agreement with the statements about priesthood by the clergy who identified their theological stance and approaches to the Church life as “liberal or moderate” (because of the small size of the sample of “liberals” we merged them with the “moderates” for the purposes of analysis), or as “traditional,” or as “conservative.”

Chart 4. Theological Stance of the Clergy and Their Attitudes to the Status of Priest within Parish: % of priests with various theological approaches who agreed (“agreed strongly” and “rather agreed”) with the following statements:



Predictably, the traditional and conservative clergy are stronger proponents of clear separation between clergy and laity in the Church than liberal and moderate priests. In comparison with 54% among liberal and moderate clergy, 61% of traditional and 68% of conservative clergy feel that “Ordination to priesthood means an entirely new status which makes priest ‘different’ from laity.” Conversely, one third of liberal and moderate priests believe that “The idea that the priest is a man ‘set apart’ is a barrier to the full realization of true Christian community,” but only 14% of traditional and 22% of conservative clergy agreed with this statement.

The liberal and moderate clergy are also much more in favor of greater social involvement of clergy than traditional and conservative priests. 70% of liberal and moderate clergy agreed that “Priests today need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues beyond their own parishes,” but only 62% of traditional and only 40% conservative priests did so. In the case of all statements, there was a statistically significant relationship between theological stance of the clergy and degree of their agreement or disagreement with each statement (see Appendix 1).

III C. Clergy’ Attitudes Towards Democracy and Openness in the Church

Unlike most other Christian Churches, in American Orthodoxy, lay people have relatively “little say” in comparison with clergy in the governance of the Church, especially at the regional and national levels (laity have more influence over local parishes, particularly through service on parish councils and participation at parish assemblies). Therefore the idea of sharing in ministry with the laity is less accepted among American Orthodox priests than among Catholic and Protestant clergy. At this point, there is no established practice of *professional lay* ministers in American Orthodox churches. Therefore, it was important to explore opinions of clergy on the broad subject of *Democracy in the Church*. The respondents were offered six statements on various issues related to this subject and they were asked to which extent they agree (or disagree) with each of them. See Table 5.

Table 5. To which extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements? (% of priests)

	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Neutral, unsure	Rather disagree	Strongly disagree
Orthodox Church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons in ministry	26	30	24	16	4
I think it would be a good idea if the priests in a diocese were to choose their own bishop	18	28	20	16	18
I think it would be a good idea if Orthodox parishes were to choose their priest from among available ordained clergy	4	15	20	33	28
To be truly Orthodox Christian, one must accept without question all teachings and requirements of Orthodox Church	33	28	9	24	6
I am willing tolerate different viewpoints in Church life even if it spill into conflict sometimes	5	36	16	25	18
The Orthodox parish is like a family: people should not even think about leaving with an intent to “pick-and-choose” another parish	25	34	18	20	3

An absolute majority of American Orthodox priests support an idea of more proactive involvement of people in pew in the Church life. Indeed, 56% of clergy agreed (“agreed strongly” or “rather agreed”) with the statement “The Orthodox Church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons in ministry.”

Almost half (46%) of parish clergy agreed with the statement “I think it would be a good idea if the priests in a diocese were to choose their own bishop” expressing the feeling that ordinary clergy should have greater input on forming Church leadership. It should be noted that today procedure of selecting the bishops varies from one American Orthodox church to the other. In all cases, however, neither laity nor Orthodox parish clergy have influence on electing their bishops. The survey tells us also that there are significantly more priests who are in favor of changing the current system of selecting the bishops (46%) than the number of clergy who want to keep the things the way they are now (those 34% of respondents who disagreed with the statement “I think it would be a good idea if the priests in a diocese were to choose their own bishop”).

Remarkably, the group of priests who wish to elect their own bishops is much larger than the number of clergy who would let parishioners to choose their parish priests. Indeed, only 19% of clergy supported statement “I think it would be a good idea if Orthodox parishes were to choose their priest from among available ordained clergy” while absolute majority (61%) reject this idea.

The last three statements in Table 5 show that – in spite of their declared willingness to share in ministry with the laity – a dominant majority of American Orthodox clergy remain quite authoritarian in their attitudes to the organization of Church life. Most of them (61%) agree (either “strongly agree” or “rather agree”) with the statement “To be truly Orthodox Christian, one must accept without question all teachings and requirements of Orthodox Church.” Conversely, less than a half of the respondents (41%) said that they are “willing to tolerate different viewpoints on Church life in my parish even if it spills over into conflict sometimes.” The fact that most clergy adhere to an idea of humble obedience on part of parishioners was also confirmed by their strong agreement on the statement “The Orthodox parish is like a family: people shouldn’t even think about leaving with the intent to “pick-and-choose” another parish:” this was opinion of 59% clergy.

We compared responses to the six statements about “Democracy in the Church” provided by the clergy in various age groups: younger than 45, 45-64, 65 years and older. No relationship has been found between the age of the priests and the way they responded to the statements about “Democracy in the Church.”

Similarly, no significant difference has been found between the answers of the cradle Orthodox and convert clergy. As for distinctions between GOA and OCA priests, the only serious difference was in their responses to the statements about elections of bishops by the priests and about election of priests by parishioners. More OCA than GOA priests favored both these ideas. Generally speaking, however, the age of the clergy, their religious upbringing and their denominational culture have *no* influence on their attitudes towards various issues related to the subject of the “Democracy in the Church.”

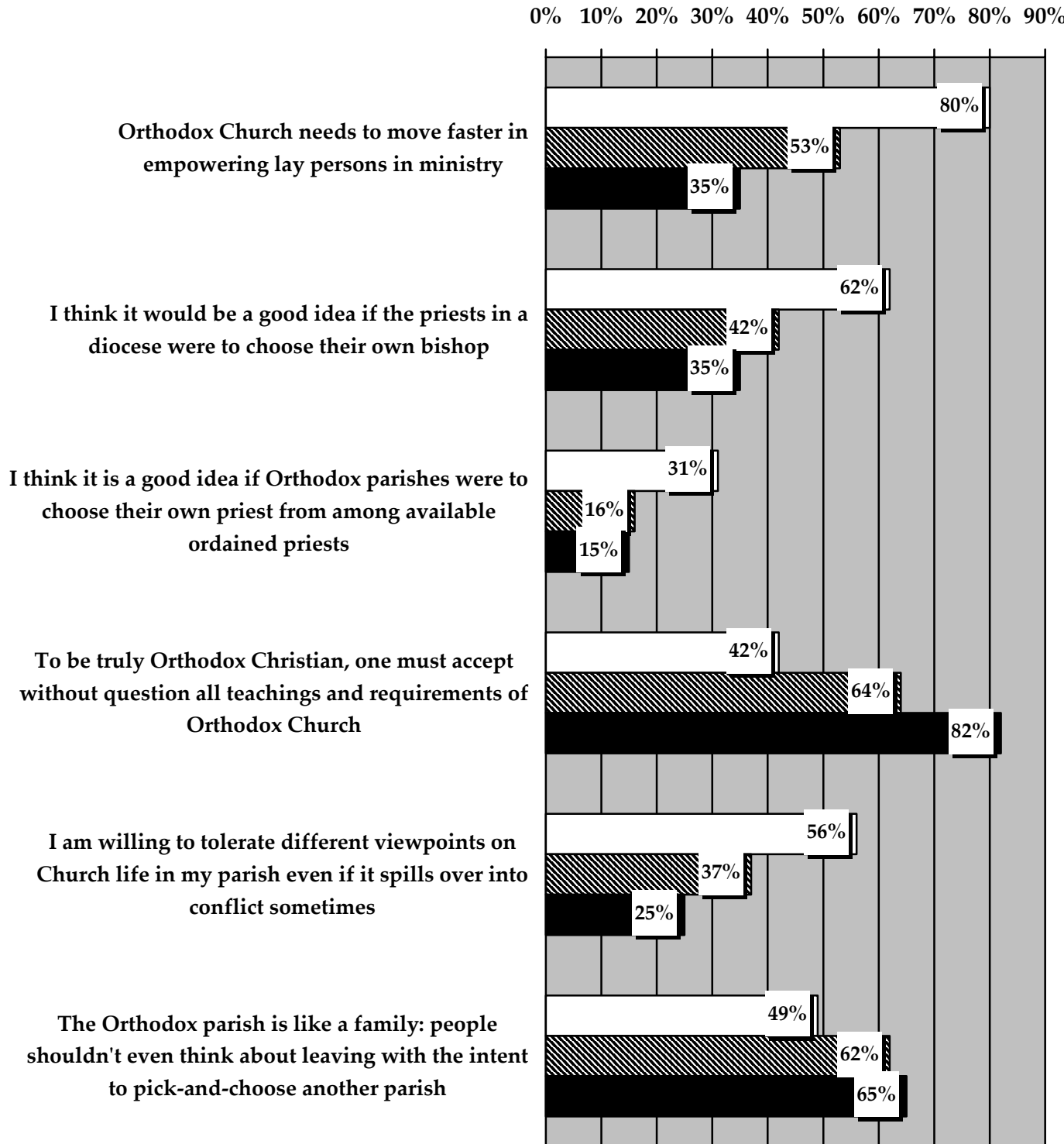
To the contrary, the theological stance of the clergy, the differences in attitudes between priests who defined their position on Church life as “liberal,” “moderate,” “traditional,” or “conservative,” is by far the most strong and important factor for the approaches of clergy to the various issues on democracy in the Church. See chart 5.

Predictably, in comparison with “moderate” and “liberal” clergy, the priests who defined their theological position and approaches to Church life as “conservative” or “traditional” were much less likely to support statements about empowering laity in ministry, electing bishops and parish priests, and tolerating different viewpoints in a local parish. To the contrary, fewer “moderate” and “liberal” than “traditional” and “conservative” clergy agreed with the statements “To be truly Orthodox Christian, one must accept without question all teachings and requirements of Orthodox Church,” “In case of disagreements with laity, priests should have final authority in the parish,” and “The Orthodox parish is like a family: people shouldn’t even think about leaving with the intent to pick-and-choose another parish.” In the case of all six statements, a statistically significant relationship has been found between theological stance of the clergy and degree of their agreement (or disagreement) with each statement (see Appendix 1).

Chart 5. Theological Stance of the Clergy and Their Attitudes to the Democracy in the Church

% of priests with various theological approaches who agreed (“agreed strongly” and “rather agreed”) with the following statements:

□ Liberal and Moderate clergy, % ▨ Traditional clergy, % ■ Conservative clergy, %



III D. Clergy' Attitudes towards Changes and Innovations in the Church

As noted earlier, “by default” Orthodox Christianity tends to adhere to established traditions and practices. Changes and innovations in the church life are in many cases discouraged and they are always subject to approval by bishops. Because of these circumstances, it was especially important to examine personal attitudes of the ordinary parish priests towards innovations in the Church. The survey offered clergy five statements on various possible changes in the church life. The proportion of priests who either agreed or disagreed with these statements is in Table 6.

Table 6. To which extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements? (% of priests)

	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Neutral, unsure	Rather disagree	Strongly disagree
The Orthodox Church should allow its local parishes more freedom to explore new forms and patterns of liturgical life.	3	12	9	25	51
All Orthodox Christians should have the individual freedom to interpret the Scriptures and Orthodox Tradition for themselves and be tolerant of differing interpretations.	0	5	3	22	70
I think it would be a good idea if women were ordained to the diaconate	14	17	14	15	40
I think it would be a good idea if marriage could happen after ordination	6	10	9	21	54
I think it would be a good idea if bishops could be selected from among married clergy, in addition to celibate clergy	24	22	16	13	25

The first two statements touch similar subjects: greater freedom for the local parishes to experiment with forms of liturgical life and greater freedom for individual Orthodox believers to interpret Scripture and Tradition. Both statements challenge strong hierarchical authority and unquestionable acceptance of inherited patterns of life typical for the Orthodox Church. These statements also challenge necessity to get approval from the bishops for any innovations. They also reflect a more individualized approach to faith, more commonly found in Protestant Churches.

Very few priests favored an idea that “Orthodox Church should allow its local parishes more freedom to explore new forms and patterns of liturgical life:” only 15% of respondents “rather agreed” or “agreed strongly” with this statement. In other words, only tiny minority of clergy feel need for a greater freedom to experiment and to decide by themselves locally about innovations in liturgy.

The question which remains at this point unanswered: why do priests reject the idea of greater flexibility of the individual parishes in how worship is organized? Is this because they are satisfied with the present situation and truly keen on keeping liturgical life unchanged? Or are clergy afraid of the potential situation when they may face but would not be prepared to deal with the grass-roots initiatives of their parishioners? Also, we must admit that the question itself was intentionally vague, leaving it open to interpretation by the respondents as to what constitutes a “new form and pattern” of liturgical life. Further research is required. Not surprisingly, even fewer priests (5%) supported second statement that “All Orthodox Christians should have the individual freedom to interpret Scripture and Orthodox Tradition for themselves and be tolerant of differing interpretations.” We conclude that a vast majority of parish clergy want to keep the current situation in which experimentation with liturgical life or interpretation of the Scripture is largely seen as a prerogative of the Church hierarchs.

The remaining three statements address a broad issue of who is eligible to enter the priesthood: either as deacons or as priests or as bishops. Clergy responses to the third statement “I think it would be a good idea if women were ordained to diaconate” show that only less than one-third of the clergy (31%) would allow women to enter even lowest rank of the priesthood and to serve in the Church as deacons. This is a somewhat surprising finding because it is a well known fact that the Orthodox Church had women deacons until the Middle Age. Further, in 1989 a pan-Orthodox consultation determined that the ordination of women to diaconate was acceptable and should be restored.

One of the basic rules in the Orthodox Church regulating relationship between marital status and eligibility for the priesthood is that a man must marry prior to his ordination to the diaconate, if he plans to be married at all. The other option is that one can be ordained after taking vows of celibacy, but in any case bachelors (e.g. somebody who still considers marriage in the future) cannot enter priesthood. As a result, there has always been a number of young seminary graduates qualified and desiring to become priests who were unable to be ordained because they had not yet found their mate but did not want to remain celibates either. The fourth statement - “I think it would be a good idea if marriage could happen after ordination” - voices the abandonment of this requirement. However restrictive the extant rule is, only one out of six priests (16%) feel that requirement to be married prior to ordination is unnecessary. Two factors, however, should be noted. First, our study examined only approaches of the clergy who are currently in “good standing,” but we did not ask opinions of the persons who happened to be on the “other side of the barricade:” the young seminary graduates who are forced to postpone ordination until their marriage and the priests who were divorced.

Second, we wonder about the responses if we had asked whether marriage could take place after ordination to the diaconate, but prior ordination to the priesthood.

The last statement - “I think it would be a good idea if bishops could be selected from among married clergy in addition to celibate clergy” - challenges current requirement of celibacy to be eligible to the highest rank in the Orthodox Church. In the USA, the proportion of celibate Orthodox clergy is very low: 7-8% according to the survey. As a result, in today’s American situation, this requirement means an acute shortage of worthy candidates to fill up the most important and influential positions in the Church. There has been an international discussion of this issue by scholars, and it is also a fact of history that for the first seven centuries of Christian history bishops were selected from both married and monastic clergy. Not surprisingly, almost half of parish clergy (46% who either “rather agreed” or “agreed strongly”) feel that the rule about required celibacy for the bishops should be changed.

With only one exception, there was *no* significant difference in degree of agreement with statements on “Innovations in Church” between GOA and OCA clergy, between priests in various age categories and between cradle Orthodox and convert clergy. The only statement to which various categories of clergy responded differently was the statement “I think it would be a good idea if bishops could be selected from among married clergy in addition to celibate clergy.” Many more GOA (57%) than OCA (34%) clergy supported election of bishops from among married clergy. To the contrary, much fewer of the younger (under 45) priests than middle-aged (45-64) and senior (older than 65) clergy agreed with the statement “I think it would be a good idea if bishops could be selected from among married clergy in addition to celibate clergy:” 35%, 50% and 53% respectively.

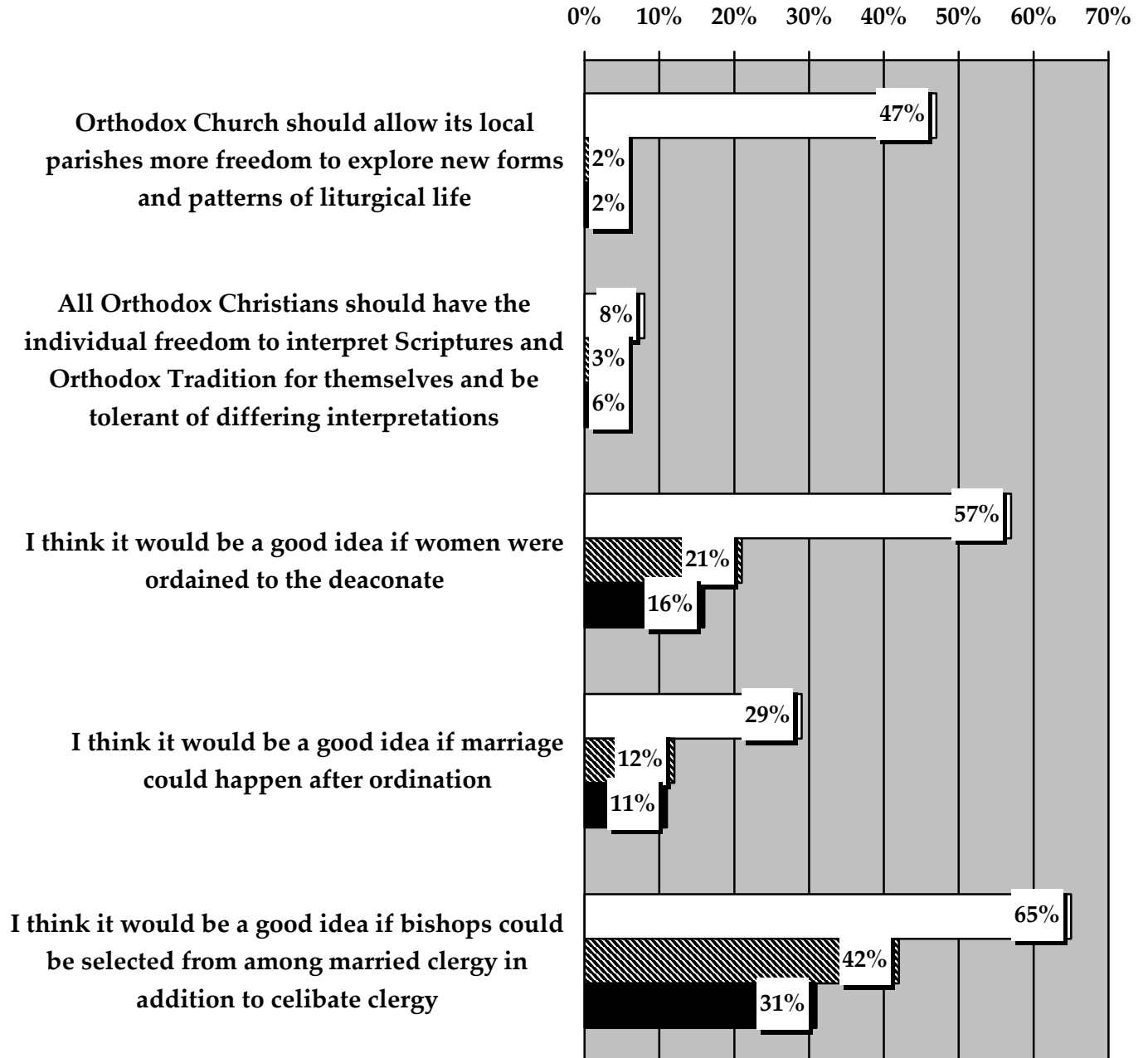
Hence, overall, no statistically significant relationship has been found between “denominational culture” (GOA versus OCA), religious upbringing (cradle Orthodox versus converts) and the age of the clergy, on the one hand, and their opinions possible innovations in the Church, on the other hand.

In comparison with rather subtle distinctions between GOA and OCA clergy, between various generations of priests and between cradle Orthodox and convert clergy, the theological stance of the priests – their self-identification as being either “conservative,” or “traditional,” or “moderate,” or “liberal” – is most stronger predictor for the differences in responses to the statements about changes and innovations in the Church. See chart 6.

Chart 6. Theological Stance of the Clergy and Their Attitudes to Changes and Innovations in Church

% of priests with various theological approaches who agreed (“agreed strongly” and “rather agreed”) with the following statements:

□ Liberal and Moderate clergy, % ▨ Traditional clergy, % ■ Conservative clergy, %



As one can expect, the clergy who identified themselves as “liberal” and “moderate” were much more likely to agree with all five statements than the “traditional” or “conservative” priests. In case of all five statements a sound statistical relationship has been found between theological stance of the clergy and their attitudes towards possible changes and innovations in the Church. See Appendix 1.

In addition to this somewhat predictable relationship, one more peculiarity should be noted. By and large, the responses of “traditional” and “conservative” clergy were relatively similar to each other but clearly distinct from the answers of “liberal” and “moderate” priests. Put differently, in their approaches to various innovations and changes in the Church, the “conservatives” and “traditionalists” are largely in the same camp, while attitudes of “liberals” and “moderates” put them far away from what can be described as the mainstream of the Orthodox Church.

III E. Ecumenical Attitudes of the Clergy: Their Relations to the Outside Non-Orthodox Community

Since the 1940s, the Eastern Orthodox Churches throughout the world have been involved in various levels of inter-Christian dialogue working toward reconciliation of all Christians. They are members of the World Council of Churches, the Council of European Churches, and various local councils of Churches including the National Council of Churches in Christ USA and Massachusetts Council of Churches. Both internationally and locally the Eastern Orthodox Churches are engaged in bilateral dialogues with the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and other Churches. The Orthodox Churches are also involved in various inter-religious dialogues most notably with Islam.

For the most part, however, these discussions and encounters take place at the highest levels, involving Church leaderships and scholars, but with little inter-Christian and interfaith contacts taking place at the diocesan or parish level, and with little involvement of ordinary parish clergy and their parishioners. Further, as noted, a strong notion of “distinctiveness” and sense of a close-knit community which is culturally and religiously different from the wider society were fundamental for the earlier generations of Orthodox believers in the US. To a certain degree, this self-perception remains intact in many American Orthodox parishes. How do Orthodox parish clergy relate themselves to the outside non-Orthodox community? What are their approaches to the ecumenical contacts? Four statements in our questionnaire explored this issue. See Table 7.

Clearly, today, there are very few (9 %) radical “hard-liners” among American Orthodox priests who would “agree strongly” or “rather agree” with the statement “Only members of the Orthodox Church can be saved.”

Table 7. To which extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements? (% of priests)

	Strongly agree	Rather agree	Neutral, unsure	Rather disagree	Strongly disagree
Only members of the Orthodox Church can be saved	4	5	15	29	47
I can perfectly well imagine myself learning about Christian faith from the people in other (not Orthodox) Christian churches	4	33	17	19	27
The only reason for Orthodox clergy to participate in inter-Christian meetings and discussions is to spread the message of Orthodox Christianity and to seek conversion of others into the Orthodox faith	17	29	16	30	8
The Orthodox Church in the US should welcome Roman Catholic priests and Protestant ministers who want to become Orthodox priests	29	38	19	8	6

At the same time, while tolerating and accepting validity of the other religious cultures, most Orthodox parish clergy do not feel that communication and interaction with the religiously different “others” are beneficial. Only slightly more than one-third of the priests (37%) agreed with the statement “I can perfectly well imagine myself learning about Christian faith from the people in the other – not-Orthodox – churches,” while almost half (46%) of them disagreed with this statement. There are significantly more Orthodox clergy who believe that “The only reason for Orthodox clergy to participate in inter-Christian meetings and discussions is to spread the message of Orthodox Christianity and to seek conversion of others into the Orthodox faith” than the number of those who disagreed with this statement: 46% and 37% respectively.

While most clergy are reluctant and skeptical in their approach to inter-religious contacts, an absolute majority of them approve having more converts among their fellow priests. Indeed, two thirds of priests (67%) would welcome former Roman Catholics and Protestants clergy if they will convert to Orthodox Christianity with the purpose to become Orthodox priests. It should be noted that different groups of priests demonstrated somewhat different attitudes towards issue of ecumenism and relations with the outside non-Orthodox community. A much greater proportion of OCA than GOA clergy expressed their willingness to learn from “religiously others” and agreed with the statement “I can perfectly well imagine myself learning about Christian faith from the people in other (not Orthodox) Christian churches:” 43% and 31% respectively. Accordingly, more OCA than GOA priests would welcome former Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy into Orthodox priesthood and agreed with the statement “The Orthodox Church in the US should welcome Roman Catholic priests and Protestant ministers who want to become Orthodox priests:” 74% and 60% respectively.

It is worth repeating that the OCA has a much higher percentage of converts among its clergy than the GOA.

The convert clergy are more skeptical about the usefulness of ecumenical contacts than their fellow cradle Orthodox priests. In comparison with 41% among the cradle Orthodox clergy, 55% of convert clergy feel that “The only reason for Orthodox clergy to participate in inter-Christian meetings and discussions is to spread the message of Orthodox Christianity and to seek conversion of others into the Orthodox faith.” This finding could be due, at least in part, to negative attitudes towards ecumenism found in some Protestant communities which is being carried into the Orthodox Church by convert clergy from those backgrounds.

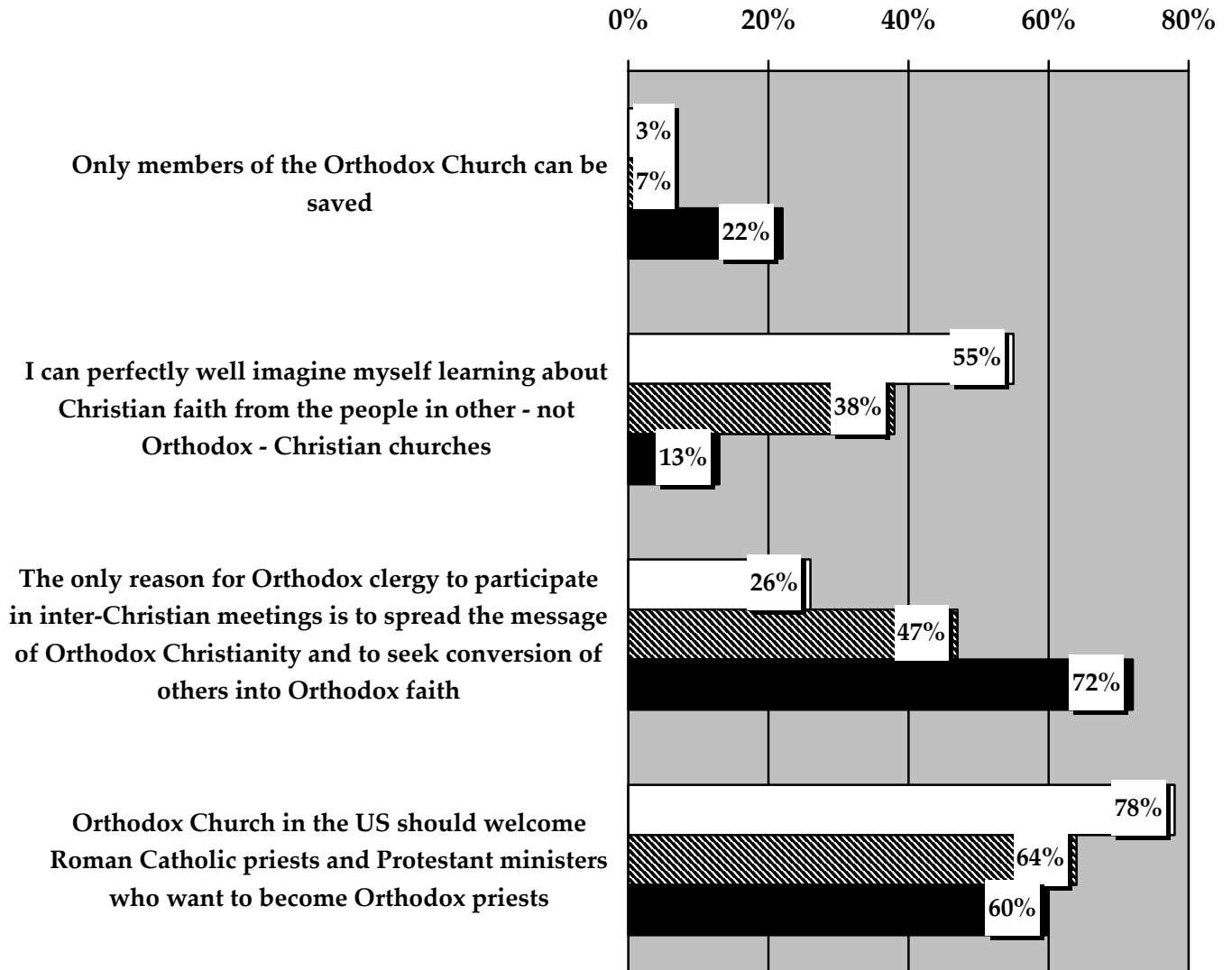
As for generational differences, we found a clear (and statistically sound) relation between the age of the priests and their willingness to accept former Catholic and Protestant clergy as their fellow Orthodox priests. The older Orthodox priests are the most likely and the younger clergy are the least likely to welcome former non-Orthodox clergy into Orthodox Church. Indeed, 83% of the older priests agreed with the statement “The Orthodox Church in the US should welcome Roman Catholic priests and Protestant ministers who want to become Orthodox priests” in comparison with 69% among middle-aged and only 55% among younger priests.

Most noticeable, however, and similarly to what we saw in the case of statements on *Notion of Priesthood* or on *Democracy in the Church* or on *Innovations in the Church*, the greatest differences in clergy’s attitudes towards ecumenism and in their approaches to the outside not-Orthodox community are based not on distinctions between GOA and OCA, and not on variations between age-groups or between cradle-Orthodox and convert clergy, but on the theological stance of the clergy. The clergy who defined themselves as either “liberal” or “moderate” or “traditional” or conservative” responded extremely differently to all statements dealing with *Ecumenical Attitudes and Relation to the Outside not-Orthodox community*. See chart 7.

Chart 7. Theological Stance of the Clergy and their Ecumenical Attitudes and Relation to the Outside not-Orthodox community

% of priests with various theological approaches who agreed (“agreed strongly” and “rather agreed”) with the following statements:

□ Liberal and Moderate clergy, % ▨ Traditional clergy, % ■ Conservative clergy, %



Virtually none (3%) of “liberal and moderate” clergy agreed that “Only members of the Orthodox Church can be saved,” but more than one-fifth of the “conservative” priests feel this way. Conversely, more than a half (55%) of “liberal and moderate” clergy said that “I can perfectly well imagine myself learning about Christian faith from the people in other – not-Orthodox – Christian churches,” but only 13% of conservative priests agreed with this statement. Almost three quarters (72%) of “conservative” priests deny the usefulness of the inter-Christian contacts by endorsing the statement that “The only reason for the Orthodox clergy to participate in inter-Christian meetings and discussions is to spread the message of Orthodox Christianity and to seek conversion of others into Orthodox faith,” but only one quarter (26%) of the “liberal” and “moderate” clergy would take such a stance.

Finally, significantly more of the “liberal and moderate” clergy (78%) feel that “Orthodox Church in the US should welcome Roman Catholic priests and Protestant ministers who wanted to become Orthodox priests,” than this is among “traditional” (64%) or “conservative” (60%).

In the case of all four statements, we found clear statistical relationship between theological stance of the clergy and their attitudes towards ecumenism and relations with the outside non-Orthodox community. See Appendix 1.

IV. Conclusions

As Orthodox theologian Aristotle Papanikolau pointed out, the inability to adapt to American cultural pluralism has led to an *increasing fragmentation of American Orthodox Christianity* both on the level of the institutional Orthodox churches and on the level of local Orthodox communities. That is “indeterminacies, internal strains and conflicts are evident in Orthodoxy in America in the sheer diverse number of interpretations of what it means to be an Orthodox Christian through the eclectic appropriations of traditional Orthodox Christian beliefs, rituals and symbols by those who choose to maintain some affiliation with Orthodox identity. Indeed, within the Orthodox churches in America you have diverse interpretations and appropriations of the traditions that lead to diverse theologies that span the spectrum of the extremes of the so-called “Culture Wars.” (Papanikolau, 2008). At this point, there is no reliable nationally representative data to evaluate this thesis from perspective of sociology and in relation to the whole American Orthodox Christian population. The survey on “Evolving Vision of Orthodox Priesthood in America,” however, allowed us to partially examine this thesis by looking at the theologically based divisions within American Orthodox priesthood. Two findings are of particular importance and provide good insight into question of “why” and “how” Orthodox parish priests shape the lives of their congregations in the very distinct ways.

First, there is no relationship between individual micro-theology of the clergy, on the one hand, and their age, religious upbringing, or denominational culture, on the other hand. The priests representing various generations, and the cradle Orthodox and convert clergy, and the priest from various American Orthodox jurisdictions (denominations) are equally likely to identify themselves with either “liberal-moderate” or “traditional-conservative” church camps.

Second, today, the greatest differences in the approach of American Orthodox clergy to various aspects of parish life are based not on distinctions between various Orthodox jurisdictions (denominations), and not on variations between various age-groups of the priests or between cradle-Orthodox and convert clergy, but on their individual “micro-theological” stance. Accordingly, the self-identification of the priests as being either “liberal” or “moderate” or “traditional” or “conservative” serves as the strongest predictor for clergy’ varied attitudes towards wide range of issues related to *Status of the Priest in a Parish*, and *Democracy in the Church*, and *Innovations in the Church*, and *Ecumenism and Relation to the Outside not-Orthodox Community*.

The urgent question which at this point remains unanswered is: “To what extent these findings about American Orthodox clergy are also reflective of situation among the Orthodox laity?”

Appendix 1 Spearman’s Rho Correlation Coefficients: Theological Stance of the Clergy and their Approaches to the “Status of the Priest in a Parish,” “Democracy in the Church,” “Innovations in the Church,” “Ecumenism and Relation to the Outside non-Orthodox Community.”

	When you think about your theological position and approach to Church life, which word best describe where you stand? (“Conservative,” “Traditional,” “Moderate,” “Liberal.”)		
Statements (degree of agreement with each statement)	Spearman’s Rho	Significance (2 tailed)	Correlation is significant at:
Status of the Priest in a Parish:			
“Ordination to the priesthood means an entirely new status which makes priests ‘different’ from laity”	.150	.028	.05
“The idea that priest is a man ‘set apart’ is a barrier to the full realization of true Christian community”	.219	.001	.01
“Priests today need to be more involved with broad social and moral issues beyond their own parish’s level”	.241	.000	.01
Democracy in the Church:			
“Orthodox Church needs to move faster in empowering lay persons in ministry”	.376	.000	.01
“I think it would be a good idea if the priests in a diocese were to choose their own bishop”	.234	.000	.01
“I think it would be a good idea if Orthodox parishes were to choose their priest from among available ordained clergy”	.230	.001	.01
“To be truly Orthodox Christian, one must accept without question all teachings and requirements of Orthodox Church”	.368	.000	.01
“I am willing tolerate different viewpoints in Church life even if it spill into conflict sometimes”	.217	.001	.01
“The Orthodox parish is like a family: people should not even think about leaving with an intent to “pick-and-choose” another parish”	.153	.024	.05
Innovations in the Church:			
“The Orthodox Church should allow its local parishes more freedom to explore new forms and patterns of liturgical life”	.465	.000	.01
“All Orthodox Christians should have the individual freedom to interpret the Scriptures and Orthodox Tradition for themselves and be tolerant of differing interpretations”	.185	.006	.01
“I think it would be a good idea if women were ordained to the diaconate”	.367	.000	.01
“I think it would be a good idea if marriage could happen after ordination”	.260	.000	.01
“I think it would be a good idea if bishops could be selected from among married clergy, in addition to celibate clergy”	.250	.000	.01

	When you think about your theological position and approach to Church life, which word best describe where you stand? (“Conservative,” “Traditional,” “Moderate,” “Liberal.”)		
Statements (degree of agreement with each statement)	Spearman’s Rho	Significance (2 tailed)	Correlation is significant at:
Ecumenism and Relation to the Outside non-Orthodox Community:			
“Only members of the Orthodox Church can be saved”	.239	.000	.01
“I can perfectly well imagine myself learning about Christian faith from the people in other (not Orthodox) Christian churches”	.391	.000	.01
“The only reason for Orthodox clergy to participate in inter-Christian meetings and discussions is to spread the message of Orthodox Christianity and to seek conversion of others into the Orthodox faith”	.308	.000	.01
“The Orthodox Church in the US should welcome Roman Catholic priests and Protestant ministers who want to become Orthodox priests”	.147	.031	.05

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