

"More Orthodox" than the Orthodox: American converts to Orthodoxy

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

It's commonly observed that converts to a faith are the most ardent defenders of it. That seems to be the case with American converts to Orthodoxy. The large number of converts attending Orthodox seminaries prompted Alexey D. Krindatch, a sociologist of religion, to wonder whether an "Americanization" of Eastern Orthodoxy might lie ahead. His conclusion: "Probably not."

Responses from students at three seminaries of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America (OCA)—the two largest Orthodox bodies in the U.S.—confirmed, he said, "the widespread notion that Protestant and Catholic converts tend to be 'more Orthodox' than persons who were born and raised" as Orthodox.

The converts expressed more conservative attitudes than Orthodox-born seminarians did on, for instance, accepting the authority of bishops and discouraging ecumenical worship and religiously mixed marriages. Krindatch reported his findings at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

Asked why the tradition-bound, liturgically intricate Orthodox churches are attracting converts, Krindatch suggested in an interview that many of the former evangelical Protestants studying for the Orthodox priesthood see a "discrepancy" between their strong personal faith "and the fact that their churches have no historical roots in original Christianity, no apostolic succession and no liturgical atmosphere."

In the case of former Catholics and Episcopalians, however, converts are attempting to "return to their churches' religious experiences of 20 to 30 years ago, when their churches were more 'traditional.'"

While both Orthodox-born seminarians and the converts were relatively similar in religious upbringing, education and family income level, the former evangelicals

“come from much wealthier families” that were very active churchgoers. The ex-evangelicals were more likely to have a higher level of secular education as well as businessmen fathers, and they “were more definite in their plans to be ordained and serve as priests” than were their classmates.

Krindatch surveyed seminarians at Holy Cross (Greek Orthodox) Seminary in the Boston suburb of Brookline, where 25 percent of the students are converts, and at two OCA seminaries, St. Vladimir’s in Crestwood, New York, and St. Tikhon’s in South Canaan, Pennsylvania. The majority of the students at the latter two are converts, he said.

Krindatch recently was named director for campus ministry and church growth at the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, which is part of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Krindatch, a faculty member at the Institute of Geography in Moscow, had been doing his research as a visiting scholar at the Institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, California.

The institute in Berkeley previously has dealt mainly with theological and historical issues, said Krindatch, but it “hopes to concentrate its future studies more on the contemporary situation and social changes within various American Orthodox churches.”

Change has been slow by Western standards. In his survey, Krindatch found that 57 to 64 percent of convert seminarians agree that while most Orthodox Christians “are socially integrated into American society, the Orthodox churches as institutions are still perceived by the vast majority of Americans as “immigrant communities,” compared to 46 percent of Orthodox-born who say that. At the same time, the proportion of the most pessimistic seminarians—those who say “the Orthodox churches still are and will remain ‘strangers’ to American society”—is higher among “cradle Orthodox” than among convert seminarians.

Cradle Orthodox students are also more pessimistic than the converts that the ethnically oriented Orthodox churches eventually will gain autonomy from mother churches abroad, or that a unified American Eastern Orthodox Church will emerge in decades to come.

Ex-Protestant seminarians may hope for ecumenical progress within Orthodoxy, but they tend to reject joint ecumenical prayers or services with non-Orthodox. Also, a significant proportion of both ex-Catholic (34 percent) and ex-Protestant (36 percent

of ex-mainliners and 52 percent of ex-evangelicals) seminarians say that Orthodox priests should try hard to discourage mixed marriages. Seminarians raised in Orthodox churches are somewhat more lenient on the issue, though not as accommodating as current priests in Orthodox parishes.

A separate survey of priests in Greek and OCA parishes found that two-thirds take a more liberal position on mixed marriages—but stay within church guidelines. In other words, priests would conduct such weddings when they are held in the Orthodox Church, and would encourage the non-Orthodox partner to join the church. “Only a minority of all seminarians (31 percent of OCA seminarians, 48 percent of Greek Orthodox seminarians) share the same view,” Krindatch said.

Krindatch acknowledged that the seminarians’ conservative stances, even if reflective of a generational trend, may evolve during “actual work in the parishes.”