

Why Angels Fall, by Victoria Clark

reviewed by [James R. Payton Jr.](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

Victoria Clark takes her readers not so much on a geographical trek as on a journey from the past to the present, with stopovers in several European countries in which Orthodoxy is the dominant faith. She pulls no punches as she presents both the ugliness and the beauty she finds in contemporary Orthodoxy.

An English journalist who lived for nearly a decade in the region--and a lapsed Roman Catholic--Clark was repulsed by the xenophobic nationalism Orthodoxy has spawned, but she was attracted to the deep piety it evoked in many of those with whom she spoke. "They made me wish I could believe as they did," she confessed.

Clark begins her journey at Mount Athos--which she passes in a boat but where she, as a woman, could not set foot. She initially resents not being able to visit this center of Orthodoxy, but she refuses to let her disappointment derail her determination to explore the heritage of the sacred mountain in the rest of Orthodox Europe.

She travels not only to Slavic nations (Serbia, Macedonia and Russia) but also to Greece, Romania and Cyprus. In each country, she visits significant Orthodox sites and engages Orthodox leaders and faithful in discussion. Clark's goal is to let the Orthodox describe themselves, their history and their view of the world. She discovers that Orthodox Europe sees the world quite differently than the West does.

One of the significant differences is the inescapable presence of the past throughout Orthodox Europe. "Orthodox time has its own dynamic. Its motion is spiral, not linear," she observes. The past keeps coming back, shaping attitudes and responses. Western nations do not consciously live out of their history; the way we casually distance ourselves from it is alien to Orthodox Europe. Clark's comment on her conversation with an Orthodox about a contemporary problem-- "The clock-hands were whizzing back on Orthodox time"--captures a way of thought foreign to us but essential for understanding the worldview of the peoples and nations of Orthodox Europe.

For the most part, as Clark points out, we westerners know little of the historical path traversed by Orthodox Europe--or, consequently, of the differences from us to which it has led. Learning about and coming to a sympathetic understanding of that path and its results is not so daunting a challenge: Clark managed it, and others can be nudged in that direction by reading her book. In her wise estimation, such understanding offers more hope for good future relations than do all the recent infusions of cash and consumer goods that the area has received from the West.