

St. Herman of Alaska in dialogue with Contemporary American Christian Identity

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St. Herman of Alaska, an eremitic 19th century monk and subsequently a canonized saint in the Orthodox church, is almost exclusively studied as a Russian missionary. However, I argue that the meaning of St. Herman for contemporary American Christian identity bears little to no trace of his foreign origin. Instead, St. Herman has become imperative for the construction of an authentic American Orthodox Christian identity in the 20th century. With his relics on Kodiak island now a popular destination for pilgrimage, the saint embodies three aspects of religious experience central to American Orthodoxy not as a foreign ancient faith but as a modern religious movement. First, traveling to venerate St. Herman is a journey through geographical and mystical wilderness—to the “final frontier” of the American map as well as within the American faith. Secondly, his ascetic feats and miracles both prove the power of his religious convictions and challenge the disbelief of secular authority; in this way, he represents American individualism as much as Orthodox mysticism. Thirdly, St. Herman lived an eremitic monastic life of hesychastic heritage which requires unceasing contemplation and prayers in order for a person to reach metaphysical experience which in the Eastern Christian tradition is known as *theosis*—deification. This may appear quite different from the forms of Christianity practiced currently by the majority of the American population. Yet I propose that St. Herman is not the opposite to but rather a mirror for the desire for spiritual transcendence that saturates contemporary American Christian identity. To pilgrimage to his relics in Alaska is to partake in a dynamic dialogue between Orthodox Christianity and American identity—a dialogue facilitated by St. Herman and his legacy which continues to engage, evolve, and echo.