

PROFESSOR BURGESS NAMED TO CENTER OF THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY RESEARCH TEAM

Recently the Center of Theological Inquiry (Princeton, N.J.) announced its 2014-2015 research team investigating the topic, Law & Religious Freedom. Pittsburgh Seminary's the Rev. Dr. John Burgess, James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology, is one of the international, 14-member group. John will contribute his expertise on Russia as he joins visiting theologians and legal scholars from across the U.S. and from Italy, Hungary, China, and the Netherlands in researching this theme—of vital interest to Christians around the world.

“My goal for the year at CTI,” says John, “is to write a book; the conversations with the team of scholars will help me frame it.” Over the past decade, John has spent two year-long sabbaticals in Russia, where he has conducted dozens of interviews with Orthodox Church leaders and visited numerous parishes, monasteries, and memorial sites. Growing out of his initial research, John's most recent book, *Encounters with Orthodoxy*, explores places of theological convergence and divergence between the Reformed and the Orthodox traditions.



John explains, “My work has focused especially on the Russian Orthodox Church—its resurgence since the collapse of communism, its effort to assert itself as a comprehensive social force, and its vision of a post-communist Russian national identity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church has emerged as an influential social and political force in the Russian Federation. Through major initiatives in religious education, social ministry, historical commemoration and interpretation, and renewal of parish life, the Church is seeking to construct a comprehensive Orthodox culture within Russian society.” He elaborates, “While affirming Constitutional separation of church and state, the Church nevertheless sees only historic Orthodoxy and its foundational narratives, symbols, and rituals as capable of uniting the Russian nation and defining its identity and aspirations among the nations of the world.”

In recent weeks, John has been carefully tracking the position of the Russian Orthodox Church in relation to events in Ukraine and how the Church will respond to the presence of other Orthodox churches in Crimea—“churches that the Moscow Patriarchate regards as schismatic.” He recently returned from Germany, where he was researching German responses to the current crisis in Ukraine. “I found it fascinating to see how major German politicians and church leaders have framed the Ukrainian situation quite differently from the way the U.S. media have,” he noted.

Through the Continuing Education Office at PTS, in May John hosted a reflective discussion titled “Crimea, and Russia: The Religious Factor” along with his colleague, William Gleason, a specialist on Ukraine for the U.S. Department of State's Foreign Service Institute. “Many Americans have difficulty making sense of Russia's actions in relation to Ukraine and Crimea,” John observes. “The seminar demonstrated the key role that Catholic and Orthodox churches have played in shaping how Ukrainians and Russians think about national identity and sovereignty.” Some 75 people attended the event.

John is “especially interested in the operative theology of church and culture that guides the Church's major social and political initiatives and the implications of this theology for religious freedom.” In the book he writes at CTI, he aims to describe and evaluate this theology and how it has resulted in a troubling ambivalence about the legal and cultural status of other religious communities in Russia.

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