

For the Life of the World and Orthodox Political Theology

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj**Cyril Hovorun** 

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Abstract

The article explores the document *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church (FLW)* in the contexts that had instigated its promulgation. It maps this document in the coordinates of the Orthodox political theology during the long twentieth century. *FLW* corresponds to a line in “the theology of the 1960s,” which advocated for liberal democracy and against anti-Westernism. The article argues that *FLW* fulfills the unaccomplished mission of the Panorthodox council in producing a comprehensive Orthodox social doctrine. It compares *FLW* with the social corpus adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church during the 2000s.

Keywords

social doctrine, Orthodox political theology, Panorthodox council, human rights, human dignity

It is not just a coincidence that the social doctrine published recently by the Ecumenical Patriarchate has the same title as the influential book by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann.¹ This doctrine is based on the work of previous generations of theologians, including those who, like Schmemmann, envisaged an Orthodox *aggiornamento*. *For the Life of the*

1. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1982).

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World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church (FLW) is a statement of such *aggiornamento*. It epitomizes the Orthodox political and public theologies during the long twentieth century.

Attempts at the Orthodox *Aggiornamento*

The long twentieth century began before 1900. That year, Vladimir Solovyov died, who can be considered the first modern Orthodox political theologian (we do not count premodern political theologians, such as Eusebius of Caesarea and Augustine of Hippo). In his *Lectures on Divine Humanity*² and other works, Solovyov attempted to synthesize the traditional Orthodox theology with contemporary liberal political ideas.³ He appreciated what we now call human rights, pluralism, and even secularism. At the same time, he tried to substantiate such appreciation theologically. He argued that modern liberal ideas could be framed by traditional Orthodox concepts, such as “theanthropy” (*bogochelovechestvo*). He called his synthesis “free theocracy.” It had little to do with theocracy as such and implied that divine love should inspire modern Christian thinking about the church in the modern world’s relationship to humankind. In general terms, the *FLW* follows Solovyov’s train of thought.

Solovyov was born in Moscow in 1853—the place and time of heated debates about a new role of the Orthodox Church in modernized society. The so-called Slavophiles were the protagonists of these debates. They tried to synthesize concepts stemming from German idealism with Russian nationalism and imperialism, which Solovyov criticized.⁴ What Solovyov valued was the Slavophile’s synthesis between German idealism and the Orthodox concept of the church. The most famous Slavophile concept, *sobornost’*, which can be approximately translated as “conciliarity,” resulted from such synthesis.⁵ *Sobornost’* was, in effect, a social and even a political concept. It was a cornerstone of Slavophile political theology. It emerged out of the Slavophile ecclesiology founded by Aleksey Khomyakov (1804–60). Khomyakov’s theology of the church also became a cradle of modern Orthodox ecclesiology. It was initially designed not as just a theological but as a theopolitical doctrine and suggested reforms of Russian society based on communitarianism. For this reason, by the way, the Slavophile movement was not favored and sometimes even suppressed by the Czarist regime. It is also worthy to note that the Slavophile’s ideological opponents—the so-called “Westerners” (*Zapadniki*)—avoided putting their social and political ideas in theological terms.

2. English translation: Vladimir Solovyov, *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, trans. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1995).

3. See Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2012), 34–35.

4. See Vladimir Solovyov, *Russia and the Universal Church*, trans. Herbert Rees (London: G. Bles, 1948).

5. See Alexei Khomiakov: *The Mystery of Sobornost’*, ed. Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen, Teresa Obolovitch, and Pawel Rojek (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2020); Kallistos Ware, “Sobornost and Eucharistic Ecclesiology: Aleksei Khomiakov and His Successors,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 11, no. 2 (2011): 216–35.

Arguably the most prominent Orthodox political theologian of the long twentieth century, Sergey Bulgakov (1871–1944), began as a social reformer.⁶ He started his career as a scholar of political economy and later converted to “Christian socialism.” His later and mature ideas about social justice and economy⁷ resonate with *FLW*. For example, Bulgakov built his political theology on the category of freedom. This category, for him, applies to any individual, a social class, and the church. He advocated for the freedom of the church from both the state and the corporate interests of the clerical class within it. Christian politics, for him, should seek “the emancipation of all humanity, universal freedom, for which there can be no distinction among nationalities, religions, or denominations.”⁸ The concept of freedom is also *FLW*’s leitmotif. Remarkably, this document makes explicit references to the theologians who represented Fr. Sergey Bulgakov’s line, such as St. Maria Skobtsova (*FLW* §27).

In contrast to Bulgakov’s line, some Orthodox theologians in the same interwar period, when Bulgakov wrote his most important oeuvres, were developing a different line, which valued integrity more than freedom. They concentrated on criticizing modernity and its assumed corruption of mores. They promoted what we now call “traditional values,” and some of them overtly aligned with the national-socialist ideology of their time. I would call this line of thinking “the political theology of the 1930s” because it expressed the totalitarian spirit of that decade. Elsewhere in other Christian confessions, theologians like Gerhard Kittel (1888–1948), Paul Althaus (1888–1966), and Emanuel Hirsch (1888–1972) expressed the same spirit.⁹ Among the Orthodox protagonists of “the political theology of the 1930s,” I would highlight the Romanian Nichifor Crainic (1889–1972). His political theology has been characterized as “Orthodoxism.”¹⁰ He propagated anti-Semitism and a combination of Byzantinism and nationalism, like in the following passage:

A great river of orientalism, then, flowed in the riverbed of our people’s soul. Byzantium and Kiev took their tool as it passed by, flowed underneath Orthodoxy—that import, which in time developed into the reservoir of our primitive forces. [Orthodoxy] thus forms part of our people’s wealth and constitutes yet a power by which our patriarchal mentality, our native genius, differentiates itself from and resists the currents of European civilization, so fresh in their historical origin.¹¹

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6. See Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).
 7. Expressed, for example, in Sergei Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2000).
 8. Sergey Bulgakov, “An Urgent Task,” in *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890–1924*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: Fordham, 1990), 149.
 9. Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2010).
 10. See Roland Clark, “Nationalism and Orthodoxy: Nichifor Crainic and the Political Culture of the Extreme Right in 1930s Romania,” *Nationalities Papers* 40, no. 1 (2018): 107–2, here 113–15.
 11. Nichifor Crainic, “Parsifal,” *Gîndirea* 8–10 (1924): 185; English translation by Ionuț Florin Biliuță, “Between Orthodoxy and the Nation: Traditionalist Definitions of Romanianness in Interwar Romania” (MA thesis at Central European University, 2007), 52.

FLW condemns this kind of political theology that underpins nationalism (§11), “Byzantinism” (§51), anti-Semitism (§57), and all sorts of “blasphemous philosophies of race” (§11).

At the same time, *FLW* aligns with many points of what can be called “the political theology of the 1960s.” This theology emerged after World War II and affected all Christian traditions, including the Orthodox. In contrast to the first half of the twentieth century, which was dominated by the Russian political theologians, Orthodox political theology during the second half of the twentieth was developed primarily by the Greek theologians.¹² This can be explained by the fact that Greece was one of the few free Orthodox countries in the period of the Cold War. Greek theologians after World War II engaged with theological developments outside of Greece, including Russian thought. Some of them completed their studies in the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris—the center of Russian theology in the West.

Among the protagonists of this theology were Fr. John Romanides (1927–2001) and his disciple Fr. George Metallinos (1940–2019). Still active are the theologians of the same generation, Metropolitan John Zizioulas (b. 1931) and Chrístos Yannaras (b. 1935). These theologians have demonstrated an openness to the modern world and extraordinary abilities to engage with it in creative ways. They employed contemporary philosophy, sociology, and political sciences to articulate the Orthodox tradition in terms understandable in the West. They are Westernized thinkers. At the same time, most of them (excluding John Zizioulas) gradually evolved to embrace various forms of anti-Westernism. *FLW*, on the one hand, follows the methods set by this generation of political theologians by expressing the Orthodox tradition in terms understandable in the West. On the other hand, its drafters do not share the anti-Western resentment with which many in this generation have ended up.

FLW is closer to the ideals of other movements stemming from the theology of the 1960s. One of them, “Christian Democracy,”¹³ advocates for the full applicability of modern democratic values in the traditional Orthodox milieu. It propagates its ideas through the newspaper *Christianiki (Χριστιανική)*¹⁴ and had in its ranks such prominent figures as Nikos Nissiotis (1924–86).¹⁵ The latter was a prominent figure in the global ecumenical movement. Ecumenism is the focal point of *FLW* as well. Savvas Agouridis (1921–2009) was another protagonist of the same line.¹⁶ His line is continued by his disciple Petros Vassiliadis (b. 1945).

We can, thus, speak about internal strife within “the theology of the 1960s.” On the one hand, there are theologians like Fr. John Romanides, Fr. George Metallinos, and

12. See Γεωργίου Μεταλληνού, *Θεολογικός Αγώνας. 1962—Ιστορία* (Αθήνα: Παρουσία, 1989).

13. See Panteles Kalaitzides, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012), 79.

14. <https://xristianiki.gr/> (accessed March 4, 2021).

15. Απόστολου Νικολαΐδη, *Κοινωνικοπολιτική επανάσταση και πολιτική θεολογία* (Κατερίνη: Τέρτιος, 1987).

16. See Σάββα Αγουρίδη, *Θεολογία και κοινωνία σε διάλογο* (Αθήνα: Άρτος Ζωής, 1999).

Christos Yannaras, who became proponents of Hellenic civilizational exceptionalism. On the other hand, other theologians from the same generation of the 1960s articulated a non-exceptionalist standpoint. In contrast to the former, they advocated for human rights and liberal democracy. They also criticized various forms of religious and ethnic exceptionalism among the Orthodox. For example, Pantelis Kalaitzidis (b. 1961), the director of the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, is an outspoken critic of Orthodox nationalism and anti-Westernism.¹⁷ He is also one of the most prominent Greek political theologians, whose work is well known in the West.¹⁸ Thanasis Papathanasiou (b. 1959), the editor-in-chief of the influential periodical *Synaxi* (Σύναξη),¹⁹ is on the same page with Pantelis Kalaitzidis in criticizing Orthodox anti-Westernism and exceptionalism.

The *FLW*, while generally embracing “the theology of the 1960s,” does this with discernment. It sides with the pro-Western and pro-liberal-democracy lines upheld by *Synaxi* and the Volos Academy and clearly distances itself from the exceptionalist line. We may assume that these accents reflect the personal theological preferences of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who is also a younger representative of the same generation of the 1960s and who gave his imprimatur to *FLW*.

FLW draws from the Continental contexts of Orthodox political theology. At the same time, it cannot conceal its American pedigree and perspective on the modern problems of global Orthodoxy. This perspective has been advanced at the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University in New York. Its co-director, Aristotle Papanikolaou, has constructed a distinct political theology, which aims at reconciling the ideals of modern liberal democracy with traditional Orthodox imperatives, such as *theosis* and *askesis*.²⁰ Together with his colleague at the Center, George Demacopoulos, he also criticizes various forms of Orthodox anti-Westernism.²¹ *FLW* is concurrent with the points of the political theology developed at Fordham’s OCSC.

Panorthodox Council

FLW is not the first attempt to produce an Orthodox social doctrine. Initially, the local Orthodox churches agreed to have a common doctrine, which was supposed to be adopted at the Panorthodox council. The Orthodox were instigated into such discussions by developments in Western political theology, such as “theology after Auschwitz” and

17. See Παντελή Καλαϊτζίδη, “Ελληνικότητα και αντιδυτικισμός στη ‘Θεολογία του ’60’” (PhD thesis at Aristotle’s University of Thessaloniki, 2008).

18. See Kalaitzides, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*.

19. He has also published a book on political theology: Θανάση Παπαθανασίου, *Η ρήξη με το μηδέν. Σφηνάκια πολιτικής θεολογίας* (Αθήνα: Αρμός, 2015).

20. Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*.

21. See George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds., *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York: Fordham, 2013).

“liberation theology.” Vatican II became a model for Orthodox attempts at *aggiornamento*.

Orthodox discussions on social doctrine took place at the first Panorthodox conference in Rhodos in 1961.²² This conference identified topics for further inter-Orthodox discussions, including “Finding the ways of rapprochement for the sake of the churches’ unity in the Panorthodox whole,” “Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement,” “Cooperation of the local Orthodox churches in the implementation of the Christian ideas of peace, freedom, brotherhood, and love between peoples,” “Orthodox Church and youth,” “Marriage and family,” “Divorce,” “Birth control,” “Orthodoxy and race discrimination,” and others.²³ During other Panorthodox conferences and meetings that followed, this catalog of topics was slightly amended but remained focused on items of future social doctrine. One can see an affinity between the social-oriented thematology of pre-conciliar gatherings and *FLW*.

When the Panorthodox council (which is formally known as the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church) eventually met in Crete in 2016, more than fifty years after it had been conceived, it unfortunately failed to fulfill the initial expectations of producing a common Orthodox social doctrine. One of the reasons for such failure was the absence of some local churches, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, which had been an active participant and contributor to pre-conciliar discussions since the Rhodos meeting. Another reason is that, unlike the previous generation of hierarchs, who participated in the Panorthodox pre-conciliar discussions and demonstrated a remarkable open-mindedness, many bishops participating in the Crete council were concerned more about preserving traditions and maintaining integrity than about sending a powerful message to the world and producing a systematic social doctrine. *FLW* fulfills the mission, which had been assigned to the Panorthodox council but was not accomplished by it. *FLW* also references the council of Crete (§§21, 59, 67), without nevertheless much relying on its rather weak documents.

Russian Social Doctrine

The Russian Orthodox Church, which sabotaged the Panorthodox council in Crete, had attempted to produce its own social doctrine. The work on such doctrine was initiated and supervised by the Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad Kirill, now the Patriarch of Moscow. In 1996, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, following the initiative of Metropolitan Kirill, established a working group presided by him. This group included scholars and bureaucrats who met about thirty times. They came up with a document, which was titled *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (BSC)* and adopted by the Council of Bishops in 2000.²⁴

22. See Joseph Minihan, “The Pan-Orthodox Meeting at Rhodes,” *Blackfriars* 42, no. 498 (1961): 507–16.

23. See Григорий Скобей, “Межправославное сотрудничество в подготовке Святого и Великого Собора Восточной Православной Церкви,” *Церковь и время* 19 (2002): 54–199, here 75–80.

24. See Wil van den Bercken, “A Social Doctrine for the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Exchange* 31, no. 4 (2002): 373–85. English translation is available at <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx> (accessed March 3, 2021).

This document was envisaged as an Orthodox counterpart to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, which was in the process of being composed at that time and was published in 2004.²⁵ Russian social doctrine has been designed as an open-ended package, where new documents could be added. The same Council of Bishops in 2000 adopted an ecumenical document titled *On the Attitude of the Orthodox Church towards the Heterodox and towards Inter-Confessional Organizations*.²⁶ An important addition to this package was the document focused on the issue of human rights. It was adopted by the Council of Bishops in 2008 under the title *The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights (BTHD)*.²⁷ Similarly to the previous social documents, this one was initiated by the Metropolitan Kirill, who presided over the working group. The process of adding new documents to the package of Russian social doctrine continues. The most recent (as of March 2021) document to be added to this package is called *Ethical Problems Connected with the Method of Extracorporeal Fertilization*.²⁸

When different documents are adopted with significant time gaps, as is the case of *BSC* (2000) and *BTHD* (2008), this may create a gap in their meaning. Indeed, although these two documents belong to the same corpus, there is a significant difference between the intentions that underpin them. *BSC* epitomized a short period during which the Russian Orthodox Church lived in a relatively free society that longed for democratization. It was natural, therefore, that this document encapsulated this longing. Although *BSC* did not endorse democracy directly, it cautiously acknowledged that democracy is not incompatible with the church.

The year *BSC* was adopted, 2000, was also the year when Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin as the President of the Russian Federation. By the time Putin finished his second presidential term in 2008, the political trajectory of Russia changed to become more authoritarian and anti-Western. The popular political concept of that time was the one of “sovereign democracy.”²⁹ It had little to do with democracy as such. It implied the shift of Russian politics toward self-sufficiency and non-accountability to international institutions and norms, including that of human rights.

BTHD embodied the political concept of “sovereign democracy.” The concept of human rights it has promoted can be characterized as “sovereign.” It means it can be interpreted in an arbitrary way to fit the expedience of that political moment. *BTHD* aims at the

25. See Olga Hoppe-Kondrikova, Josephien Van Kessel, and Evert Van Der Zweerde, “Christian Social Doctrine East and West: The Russian Orthodox Social Concept and the Roman Catholic Compendium Compared,” *Religion, State and Society* 41, no. 2 (2013): 199–224.

26. English translation is available at <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/14/70.aspx#2> (accessed March 3, 2021).

27. English translation is available at https://nanovic.nd.edu/assets/17001/seminar_ji_russian_orth_church.pdf (accessed March 3, 2021). See also Cyril Hovorun, “The Theological Hermeneutics of the Russian Orthodox Church’s *Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*,” in *Christentum und Menschenrechte in Europa: Perspektiven und Debatten in Ost und West*, ed. Vasilios N. Makrides, Jennifer Wasmuth, and Stefan Kube (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), 45–48.

28. Russian text is available at <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5768019.html> (accessed March 3, 2021).

29. See Mark Smith, *Sovereign Democracy: The Ideology of Yedinaya Rossiya* (Camberley, Surrey: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2006).

relativization of universal human rights and their optional character for the Orthodox. The document tries to substitute the idea of human rights with the concept of human dignity. It interprets the latter as a human quality that depends on the appropriate utilization of freedom:

In the Eastern Christian tradition the notion of “dignity” has first of all a moral meaning, while the ideas of what is dignified and what is not are bound up with the moral or amoral actions of a person and with the inner state of his soul. Considering the state of human nature darkened by sin, it is important that things dignified and undignified should be clearly distinguished in the life of a person. (*BTHD* §I 2)

One can observe an inconsistency between the documents that constitute the official social doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church. *BSC* concurs with the earlier democratic trends in Russian political and social life, while *BTHD* is congruent with the later tendencies to isolationism and authoritarianism.

In contrast to the disarrayed package of the Russian social documents, *FLW* is a single and consistent text. It consistently and unconditionally endorses the idea of universal human rights: “In every sense, ... the language of human rights accords with the most fundamental tenets that should inform any Christian conscience” (*FLW* §63). Similarly to *BTHD*, it employs the concept of dignity, but its interpretation of this concept is different. While the Russian document presents dignity as a variable contingent on human moral choices, *FLW* takes it as an invariable feature of human nature, a “person’s infinite and inherent dignity” (§12).

Indicative of the commonalities and differences is the attitude of *BSC* and *FLW* to political regimes and protests. The former states that there are no preferable regimes for the church. At the same time, no regime is allowed

to propagate such convictions or actions which may result in total control over a person’s life, convictions and relations with other people, as well as erosion in personal, family or public morality, insult of religious feelings, damage to the cultural and spiritual identity of the people and threats to the sacred gift of life. (*BSC* §III 6)

BTHD’s take on the same issue is not much different. In case Christians face injustice, they could and should demonstrate “the higher citizenship of civil disobedience” (§9). The Russian *BSC* also envisages the possibility of civil protests. According to the document, such protests are justifiable only “if the authority forces Orthodox believers to apostatise from Christ and His Church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions” (*BSC* §III 5).

BTHD, in contrast to *BSC*, explicitly endorses liberal democracy and expresses “a genuine gratitude for the spatial democratic genius of the modern age” (§10). It also rejects the idea that all political regimes are the same and “unequivocally condemns every kind of institutional corruption and totalitarianism” (§9).

Noteworthy is *FLW*’s hermeneutics of Matt 22:21 and Rom 13:1–7. These seem to be the scriptural passages invoked most frequently by the apologists of the post-Soviet


totalitarian regimes, against popular uprisings. Such uprisings happened in Ukraine during the Orange revolution (2004–5) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–14), continue in Belarus following the falsified presidential elections in August 2020, and occur on different occasions in Russia. *FLW* interprets these biblical passages not in the sense of a commandment for unconditional civil obedience. They do not contradict the Christian quest for a more just society:

Paul's admonitions to the Christians of Rome concerned only the situation of the Church under a pagan imperial authority, and tell us nothing now regarding how Christians should seek to order society and promote civic peace when they themselves wield power. (*FLW* §9)

Conclusions

In sum, *FLW*, promulgated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, crowns several decades of attempts to produce a comprehensive social doctrine of the Orthodox Church. It is based on Orthodox inquiries into political and public theology during the last century. A Panorthodox council was supposed to formulate and adopt such a doctrine, but it failed. Other attempts, such as the social corpus of the Russian Orthodox Church, cannot be appropriated by all local Orthodox churches, as it is focused on the internal political agenda of Russia. So far, *FLW* is the most comprehensive, the most consistent, and simply the best social Orthodox doctrine. It is well balanced, richly supplied with biblical and patristic evidence, and written in a clear, compassionate, and convincing tone. I would personally argue that this is the best Christian social doctrine of which I am aware.

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He has published several books in different languages, including *Sacred Architecture in East and West* (edited, Los Angeles: Tsehah, 2019), *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018; Ukrainian translation published in 2018), *Ukrainian Public Theology* (Kyiv: Dukh i Litera, 2017, in Ukrainian), *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017; Ukrainian translation published in 2018), *Wonders of the Panorthodox Council* (Moscow: Christian Book Club, 2016, in Russian), *Meta-Ecclesiology, Chronicles on Church Awareness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Ukrainian translation published in 2017), *From Antioch to Xi'an: an Evolution of 'Nestorianism'* (Hong Kong: Chinese Orthodox Press, 2014, in Chinese), and *Will, Action and Freedom. Christological Controversies in the Seventh Century* (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2008).