

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Tradition In Eastern Orthodoxy

An Isolating Captivity Or A Renewing Mystery ?

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1. One Church - in its many diversities

Virtually any careful conversation with an Eastern Orthodox Christian will reveal just how central the one, apostolic and undivided Tradition is to their sense of being Church. In contrast, virtually every 'Western' Christian - not in a geographical but a church-historical sense - will be far more aware of the immense diversities present in the total Christian Church, both within any one culture and across all cultures. Is there any hope of bridging this often apparently unyielding divide ?

The Russian Orthodox Church, for instance, in its document of August 2000 entitled *Basic Principles of the Attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church toward the Other Christian Confessions*, lays it down in the first sentence: "The Orthodox Church is the true Church established by our Lord and Saviour Himself, the Church confirmed and sustained by the Holy Spirit, the Church about which the Saviour Himself has said: ' I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'." The existence of other confessions, throughout the 9-page paper, is only seen in terms of "break(ing) canonical relations", "mov(ing) away from unity with the Orthodox Church", "refus(ing) to accept the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils" and "falling away from the plenitude of the Church". Other Orthodox would not set it out as starkly, even defensively, as this paper born out of the painful struggles of a historic church faced with the near-total breakdown of Russian society after the collapse of

Communism. But the underlying confidence about the truth and wholeness of 'the unchanging Tradition' are widely shared.

This conviction is shared even though, as a total family of churches, the Orthodox include a remarkable variety of cultures and experiences. Just consider:

- that the ancient churches of the Greek-speaking Roman empire, joined today in communion with the Patriarch of Constantinople - despite the Roman Pope's excommunication of him a thousand years ago - by others in E. Europe, including the much younger Russian Church, share the title 'Orthodox' with five equally ancient churches: the Armenians, the Copts, the Syrians, the Ethiopians and the Thomas Christians of India. All of these, in their very different cultures, were outside the Roman Empire at the time of the Council of Chalcedon and so became accused of heresy as 'non-Chalcedonians' - yet are all just as firmly attached to the one Apostolic Tradition;
- the fact that virtually all Orthodox churches today have a large proportion of their members living scattered in hundreds of countries, often knowing in their new settings a quality of Christian life and witness envied by those still in the 'homelands';
- the fact that in recent decades many new Orthodox congregations and churches have been springing up, for example in sub-Saharan Africa, thanks to sensitive and devoted missionary work by Copts.

2. Four Problem areas

a) Layers upon layers of unshared background.

Whether in Europe, America or the 'Two-Thirds World' all of us in Protestant churches (Roman Catholic fellow-Christians may have a slightly different view !) are aware of our cultures, our nations and our churches having undergone major upheavals and changes, even

revolutions down the centuries, let alone the current convulsive pressures of modernity and globalisation. So we find it inconceivable that the teachings of our churches should be standing in direct continuity with those of the early Ecumenical Councils, let alone that the forms of worship appropriate to today should be those of 1500 years ago.

Orthodox Christians have been through no less tumultuous and painful histories, many of them for centuries under Islamic rule, many recently under Communism; for them the essential continuities of doctrine and worship have been a crucial strength and resource in their struggles, so that they find it equally hard to understand how we can claim to be 'Christian' in such a 'weak' and 'divided' way.

b) An apparently innate conservatism, especially in religious and ethical matters.

For most Orthodox, especially those in the ancient homelands, their unswerving faithfulness to the unchanging Gospel that has involved holding implacably to the ancient teachings, the ancient liturgical forms, the ancient rules for conduct. By contrast, Orthodox Christians will often feel the faith they meet in Westerners to be individualistic, light-hearted, even shallow, marked by a history which has known much more by way of 'successes' and 'new achievements' than of lasting, unyielding tragedies and pain. So what Westerners see as creative, indeed obedient freshness in adjusting to modernity, will all too easily strike Orthodox fellow-Christians as self-serving compromise with what will often risk proving to be forces of evil.

c) An unshakeable insistence that eucharistic sharing is not possible until unity is re-established.

Since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church, long known for a hard line on this, has allowed certain 'exceptional' occasions for a limited measure of eucharistic sharing, with many lay people, and even some

bishops, pushing at the boundaries of such 'exceptions' and so gradually squeezing the door ajar. In the Orthodox family there is no such relaxation, not even in the diaspora. This apparent rigidity is solidly rooted in the conviction that the policy of the Orthodox Church was laid down very, very long ago, and that no leader or synod within the Church can claim the authority to change it. The only response must be to take whatever opportunities arise for sharing in Orthodox worship, to accept the blessed (if not consecrated) bread that is distributed at the end of their liturgy, and to invite Orthodox friends to share as fully as they are able in eucharistic celebrations of other churches.

d) An unyielding conviction that unity can only be achieved as other churches reintegrate' into Orthodoxy.

Where Western churches are by now accustomed to seeing two or more previously separated churches taking steps towards fuller unity, the Orthodox have little practical experience of what can be done to grow unity either at the grass roots or at any higher level. Their speeches and documents are strangely silent in this regard; what they can do is to invite other Christians to consider the unbroken and faithful Tradition of the(ir) One, Holy and Apostolic Church, expecting that to make its own witness to the unchanging truth communicated by God in Jesus and by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

3. Four potential areas for renewal

a) A renewed sense of the universality of Christ's Church as vital to its witness.

When Westerners speak of 'unity', we often have in mind the divisions between different denominations in our locality or nation, and those same divisions now replicated around the world. This cannot be wrong,

yet for Orthodox it will never be enough. For them it is the universality, and the unity that expresses that, of the Church of Christ in every **time** that is at least as important as any consideration of **place**.

What difference, for instance, does the measure of unity reached between formerly separate denominations in India really make to the quality of the total Christian witness in India, let alone to the struggles of Christians in Belarus or Jerusalem to represent the unchanging good news of Jesus to their hostile or indifferent neighbours ? Here the Orthodox questions are rightly sharp. How can we all grow into such a sense of the universality of God, of the Good News of Jesus, and of the unstoppable work of the Holy Spirit since Pentecost, that even our small steps on the way towards unity can be known as contributing to that sort of universality?

b) A renewed sense of the objectivity and importance of corporate worship.

To worship with an Orthodox congregation is to experience how the various people involved - choir, acolytes, priest or lay people - are all caught up into something that is greater than any of them. This is not just 'their Sunday service' but the worship of the one Church of all ages and places, indeed the proper service of praise from the angels in heaven as well as from us on earth.

This came home to me on one of the first occasions when I was sharing in arranging the worship for an international conference. The text proposed for the eucharist some days later was given out, and a Serbian Orthodox student came to me, holding that text, and almost stammering "But, but, but ... this is *the* liturgy. This cannot possibly be just a Protestant service; I could not possibly *not* take part in this." His reaction was clearly not to the details of our text, rather to his lifelong sense that each act of worship was *the* worship of *the* Church, and so not to be ascribed to any one type of Christians, still less to passing

fashions. How can more of us learn to join him in such an elemental acceptance of what may in detail be strange?

c) A renewed sense of the proper mystery alike of Christian theology and of human spirituality.

For Orthodox, the word 'mystery' is an essential pointer to the ancient awareness that the things of God must not be spoken of lightly, that God is always beyond our grasp, and that any 'affirmative' truth about God must be balanced by the comparable 'negative' truth that holds open any 'explanation' of One who is beyond what human hearts and minds can grasp. Western Christians tend to speak and act as if we know definitely and clearly what God is saying and wanting us to think and do. Orthodox friends can greatly help us to discover a wholesome modesty and saintliness.

d) A lasting hope in the possibility of "the mutual correction of traditions".

One of the people from whom I have learned most about what is joyful and true in Orthodoxy, the Greek Professor Nikos Nissiotis, wrote in 1973 a paper for his colleagues on the staff of the World Council of Churches, trying to help us work constructively through the criticisms Orthodox leaders had been expressing on the occasion of the Council's 25th anniversary. It remains an indispensable tool of self-critique. In it he wrote:

It is not absolutely true that the West was only prophetic, activist and scholastic, and the East only mystical, contemplative and charismatic. These elements were always and are today interwoven and interchanged in one and the same tradition... So the WCC has to recapture this wholeness of the Christian presence, and accept the exchange of charismata as one of its primary tasks, and to act in humility without triumphalisms or self-sufficiencies in a mutual correction of traditions.

For further reading

For the Life of the World by Alexander Schmemmann (first published as an 86 page paperback by National Student Christian Federation, New York, USA, 1963, now available from St Vladimir's Press in that same city). Written for a student Christian congress, this is a rich, profound and persuasive exposition of Orthodox understanding of both sacramentality and mission.

Orthodox Visions of Ecumenism, Gennadios Limouris (Ed.) (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994, pp.283, ISBN 2-8254-1080-2). The most complete and accessible collection of representative Orthodox statements, declarations, reports and discussions about their view of the world-wide ecumenical movement, spanning the years 1902-92, and ending with 9 essays by leading Orthodox theologians commenting more personally on some of the most disputed areas.

The author

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