

The Relevance of the Gospel in an Orthodox World

The word "Orthodox" means "holding correct opinions; in harmony with what is authoritatively established, approved, and conventional". Orthodox churches comprise those that accepted decisions of first seven church Councils and relate to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. They are separate from the Catholic communion because of a split between the eastern and western branches of the organized church. In spite of the name, few adherents of Orthodox traditions whom I have met really understood the Gospel. God loves all Orthodox members and wants them to come into his family through saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Bells, smells, candles and questions

in the early morning quiet the only sound I heard was shuffling feet as a line of children, some as young as four or five, slowly made their way up the nave toward the altar. Several old women, dressed in black, sat in the front seats. Dozens of candles, some more than 30 centimetres long were poked into an enormous tray full of sand. As the flames flickered they added to the eeriness of the place. A bell rang and echoed in the ceiling. A priest emerged from a panel behind the altar. With a nod to the boys he began to intone words I could not understand, an ancient rite. From time to time he picked up a censer and waved it back and forth in front of the worshippers and the sweet smell of incense drifted through the building. Then he put down the censer and picked up a small icon depicting the Virgin Mary and the Baby Jesus. This duopoly is common in orthodox tradition. Mary dominates the scene with "her boy" resting in her arms. There were other images of Jesus on the walls; along with brightly coloured figures I had been told were the original apostles and assortment of saints. The most impressive was Saint George sitting on a horse, slaying the Dragon, the Devil. After the priest tenderly kissed the icon the children approached and kissed it in turn, moving on to allow those behind to perform the same service. Then, without warning, the ceremony was over and the children filed out into the sunshine. Back to school, back to "normal" life. I stepped outside, blinking. What was that all about? What do those who participated think they were really doing?

I have several icons of my own, bought as works of art. Two of them were painted in a monastery in Greece and the woman who sold them showed me the certificate that proved they were copied in a monastery under license from the church. No cheap substitutes here. Two others were fashioned in a monastery high up in the hills of Cyprus, from where it is possible to look out over the shore of nearby predominantly Muslim Syria and pluralist Lebanon. (Monotheist Islam cannot tolerate the adoration of Mary, or any other Christian figure for that matter, which they interpret as idolatry.) One is a replica of an early painting housed in the Kykos Monastery, near the grave of former Archbishop Makarios (elected bishop of Kition in 1948 and archbishop of Cyprus in 1950, Makarios was the first president of Cyprus). My remaining icon was painted in Russia in

the seventeenth century and smuggled into the orthodox community in Syria, where I acquired it. Orthodoxy is replete with icons.

How did this all come about?

Before the 400s, a single Christian church existed. The followers of Jesus had been promoted from a persecuted minority to purveyors of the religion of the State following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. Christianity was now "acceptable". Throughout the Christian world each nationality expressed faith via its language and liturgy and, at times, its own theology. Gradually, cultural, geographic, political and religious differences led to separate churches in the East Roman Empire. Beginning in the 400s, Eastern churches began to drift from the authority of Rome. In 476, barbarian forces led by the Germanic general Odoacer deposed the last emperor of the West Roman Empire. Many historians use this date to mark the end of the old Roman Empire and the start of the Middle Ages.

The collapse of the West half of the Roman Empire meant no single power had political control there and then barbarians (Arians or non-Christians) ruled. Beginning with Pope Gregory the Great in 590, the church set out to create a Christian world. Its instruments were the papacy and monasticism. In the 800s, Photius, patriarch of Constantinople, had a dispute with the Popes about authority over Eastern Christians. In the 1000s, a further dispute emerged between Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius. Each church claimed the other was interfering in its affairs. Serious splits led to a deep rift between the Eastern churches that employed the Byzantine rite and the Western church that followed the Latin rite and acknowledged the primacy of the Pope. The real disaster occurred during the Fourth Crusade, when mercenaries who called themselves a Christian army laid siege to the city of Constantinople for economic reasons. The city was sacked and fatally weakened, so much so that it was powerless to withstand further onslaughts and finally fell to Turkish forces in 1453, thus opening the way for Muslim armies to spread across Eastern Europe. The city was renamed Istanbul and the ancient church of Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sofia) was turned into a mosque and today serves as a museum. Several of the original icons in the church were allowed to remain in situ. When Pope John Paul II made an historic trip to Greece more than four hundred years later, many in the Orthodox community welcomed to visit; here was an opportunity for two arms of Christendom to be reconciled. However, many thousands were offended and publicly protested the treatment of the Eastern Church by Rome half a millennium ago. Feelings continue to run deep.

During its history, Orthodox tradition has splintered along national lines, mainly Greek, Russian, Georgian, Romanian, Serbian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Albanian and Syrian. This multiplicity is reflected in Orthodox communities around the world. Orthodox churches originally used Greek while the Catholic Church in West used Latin. Altogether, there are about 200 million Orthodox adherents. Some blocs have strong links with nationalist movements and in the Russian Federation, Yugoslavia and elsewhere have been instrumental in banning the

spread of the Gospel by evangelical churches and missionaries. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church was severely repressed by the Soviets because it functioned as a vehicle for nationalism. In the former USSR most children were still “baptised” under Communist rule; which explains the resilience of the Orthodox Church, and the way it has reasserted its power since the demise of the Soviet Union.

Antiochian priests I have met, including the Iraqi-born Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of Antioch and the East, believe their church is a remnant of the original church (Acts 11:19) in the city of that name. The followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Today the city of Antarkia is situated inside Turkey and the Patriarchate is based in Damascus and Sidnaiya, Syria, where I first got to know senior members of this old denomination. In some parts of Syria adherents still speak Aramaic. It is fascinating to hear people speak a language they claim has not greatly altered since the days of Jesus. No wonder they feel strongly about other denominations. Over several meetings I got to know the Patriarch and senior members of his staff. I do not understand his rituals, and frankly I question their efficacy in terms of revealed Biblical teaching, but I know he trusts Jesus Christ for his salvation. Instead of getting hung up about rites and sacerdotal outfits, I rejoiced to be able to pray with these people and talk about our common faith in the Living Christ and the hope He gives us in a world that is often at odds with faith in God. (He also made me painfully aware of the grim future facing the church in Iraq, should that country ever become an Islamic republic.)

But is it all relevant?

Ritual is a feature of Orthodox churches, but is it all necessary? I put this question to people I met in Cyprus. The church of Panayia Toiu Araka is one of the most important churches on the island of Cyprus. It stands near the village of Lagoiudhere. It was built in the twelfth century and has withstood the vicissitudes or serial occupancies of the island by competing empires. The church is covered by a large dome with twelve narrow windows and ancient (but seriously damaged) frescoes. After sitting through a service in the church one day I went to a nearby restaurant where I found several dozen men (no women) playing cards and talking, drinking and smoking. I asked them how often they went to the church. “Almost never” was the common refrain. If I need to see the priest I go. Otherwise I’m just not interested. This church is for old people”. I was perplexed and pressed the point. “So, why is the church so important in the local community?” I pressed. A group of men gathered around and talked animatedly. One man told me he had been baptized in the church, his father before him and his father before him, and so on. He would be buried from the church. He had been baptized and a baby and hoped he would go to heaven. “I’m not sure, I hope so”. Another friend told me he and his wife had been to see the priest when they could have no children. Whatever the priest did must have worked, because the man now had two small sons. The relevance of the church to this group of men related to tradition, personal problems and an insurance for the future. However, they did not regularly attend; only for baptisms, weddings and

funerals. One man told me he had been made god-father for the daughter of a friend. However, as far as spiritual guidance was concerned, this was a job for the church. The shell of a minaret nearby reminded me that this part of the island was once under Muslim control.

The Church of Saint Lazarus in central Larnaca is an impressive building with amazing icons and a long history. I visited the church a number of times. It is situated on the site of a 9th century church and houses what is claimed to be the tomb of Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, who raised him from the dead after a fatal illness (the full account is found in John Chapter 11). Orthodox Christians believe Lazarus travelled as far as Cyprus, served the church and eventually died there. The tomb is in a crypt underneath the building. Whether or not the Lazarus of the New Testament is really entombed in this place (there is no Biblical record), local people believe it to be the case. To non-Orthodox visitors the tomb and icons in the church suggest a level of hagiography (saint worship) that eclipses other elements of the faith. On a superficial level, it seems worshippers are content to visit and pay homage to an icon, believing this is enough to save them.

Winning our Orthodox friends to Christ

How can adherents of Orthodox churches come to a living relationship with Jesus Christ, if they do not already know Him? Let me make the following suggestions (not necessarily in order of priority).

On a structural level, don't attack the Orthodox Church per se – that only awakens hostility. Don't get hung up on externals, such as rites, priestly outfits and ethnic histories. Don't tell them the way to God is by leaving their tradition, which is often linked to their personal identity and family connections and national background.

On a level of personal belief, focus on what they do believe, especially about Jesus and the supernatural. You will find they are already pre-evangelised. Orthodox men and women have no trouble believing in God, the virgin birth, the miracles and resurrection of Jesus, the Second Coming, the power of prayer, the presence of the Holy Spirit, Satan and angels, aspects of Christianity that members of liberal churches often struggle to accept. All too often the locus of faith is the church building, faith is not perceived as a personal, daily lifestyle choice. God may be found at the altar but not in the kitchen. Focus on relationship with God, repentance and forgiveness of sins, the mediatorship of Jesus Christ and encourage them to pray to God through Jesus according to Scripture (1 Timothy 2:5).

Orthodox friends will study your lifestyle. If you want to have an effective impact, know the truth about baptism, salvation, communion (and where to find appropriate Biblical Scriptural support for what you believe). Show them they can have assurance of sins forgiven and a certainty of salvation. Emphasize the "once for all" nature of the death of Christ (Hebrews 9:25, 26; 10:10-12; Romans

6:8). Stress the need for them to repent personally for sin and be born again by faith, not works (Romans 4:1-5, 21-25; 5:1). Share positively – they will not fall into mortal sin by trusting Christ for salvation.

Every Orthodox priest I have ever met has been a genuine believer in Jesus and we have often shared fellowship, meals and prayer as brothers in Christ. However, the Gospel is relevant to *all* Orthodox adherents, not just the professionals.

Let's make Jesus the basis of relationships of hope with Orthodox people everywhere we go.