

Orthodoxy in the United Kingdom today

TIM GRASS

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Orthodoxy is a family of self-governing or 'autocephalous' regional churches, accepting as authoritative the decisions of the first seven Ecumenical Councils and usually co-operating and in full communion with each other. Orthodoxy in its modern forms has been present in Britain since the seventeenth century, but the variety of jurisdictions now present in Britain has arisen since 1945 as each has sought to serve the needs of its members who have settled here. This diversity should not be regarded in the same light as the variety of Evangelical denominations, from which one chooses according to theological preference: all Chalcedonian Orthodox churches would claim to hold the same faith, and in terms of their fundamental beliefs such a claim seems to be justified. For converts, the choice of church is ideally dictated by location alone, although in practice other factors, such as the degree of openness to outsiders, appear to play a considerable part.

Orthodox have often been seen hitherto as catering for particular ethnic groups, and they have suffered from the nominalism which has afflicted other churches as cradle members do nothing to demonstrate any meaningful degree of religious commitment. However, the problem has been compounded for Orthodox by the fact that their religious and ethnic identities have been bound up together so tightly that children who become anglicized in their cultural aspirations may well turn away from their parents' religion as well as their language and culture.¹ This is not helped by the fact that services are often conducted in a language such as Greek or Church Slavonic, of which younger people may have only a limited grasp.

On the other hand, Orthodox are gradually becoming more outward-looking as members of other communions disillusioned by current trends in theology or worship look for a new spiritual home. In tune with contemporary interest in all things Celtic, our islands' early (i.e. pre-1066) saints are often claimed as essentially Orthodox in their thinking, a claim which is partially justified by evidence of Eastern influence in Celtic Christian art and thought. I get the impression, too, that Orthodox apologists are attempting to emphasize what they see as the essential 'Britishness' of Orthodoxy in

order to remove some of the non-theological obstacles to conversion.

The main jurisdictions in this country which are in a position to accept converts are:

1. *The Ecumenical Patriarchate*

Readers may know this as the Greek Orthodox Church; it is headed by the Patriarch of Constantinople, who has a primacy of honour, though not of jurisdiction, among Orthodox churches (hence the title). Most Orthodox congregations in Britain and Ireland come under its jurisdiction (101 places of worship in the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain, plus 16 Ukrainian congregations organized into a separate diocese²), as do the vast majority of the 280,000 Orthodox, partly on the grounds that certain of the Ecumenical councils allocated the 'barbarian' (i.e. non-Orthodox) countries to the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; however, I understand that this has been a matter of dispute. Bishop Kallistos (Ware) belongs to this jurisdiction.

2. *The Moscow Patriarchate*

This is well known to many non-Orthodox through its cathedral in Ennismore Gardens in the heart of London's diplomatic quarter; Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of Sourozh is also a noted speaker and writer on spiritual matters, and readers will probably be familiar with the writings of Dr. Andrew Walker. It is the Russians whose church music has become so widely known and appreciated. (27 places of worship)

2a. *The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR)*

The division affecting Russian Orthodoxy has been described as a political rather than a theological division; ROCOR was set up by Russian bishops in exile after the Revolution of 1917, with the blessing of the then Metropolitan in Moscow, and is marked by its monarchist sympathies.³ Under Communism, some members

of the hierarchy of the Moscow Patriarchate were accused of collaborating with the state and going too far in accepting restrictions on church activities in order to maintain some measure of continued existence, while others were led by their convictions to speak out at the cost of imprisonment or even death. However, theological differences between the two bodies are now apparent: ROCOR seems to be markedly less enthusiastic than the Moscow or Ecumenical Patriarchates about ecumenical involvement, apparently insisting on rebaptizing all who join it, and is not presently in communion with some other jurisdictions. However, I gather that moves are now afoot towards a reconciliation. (6 places of worship, including the St. Edward Brotherhood, a monastery located within Brookwood Cemetery near Woking).

3. *The Patriarchate of Antioch*

This originally Arabic-speaking jurisdiction is smaller than the others, with 12 places of worship in Britain. Sometimes viewed as more flexible in its attitudes, like the church at Antioch in Acts, it has enjoyed a far-sighted and outward-looking leadership in recent years. When the Evangelical Orthodox Church, a grouping set up by Peter Gillquist and other Campus Crusade staff members, sought some years ago to become a part of canonical Orthodoxy, it was the Antiochian jurisdiction under Metropolitan Philip Saliba which welcomed them. More recently, it was this jurisdiction which received Michael Harper and members of the British group, 'Pilgrimage to Orthodoxy', which emerged in the wake of the Anglican decision to ordain women to the priesthood. This is the jurisdiction which, in America at any rate, seems to have the clearest vision for evangelism and church-planting, and it has encouraged former evangelicals to contribute their skills and evangelistic dynamism.

4. *Non-Chalcedonian churches*

Those who are familiar with early church history will be aware that the doctrinal debates of the early centuries produced not only some landmark definitions of the church's faith concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ, such as that put forward at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, but also some schisms (such as Monophysitism and Nestorianism) as those unable to accept one or other of these definitions separated from the main body of the church. The bodies which resulted have continued to exist through the centuries, often preserving their distinctive understanding of the points at issue between them and the Chalcedonian Orthodox. The Nestorian Church, for one, undertook considerable

missionary outreach to the East, even establishing a presence in China.

The best-known of such bodies represented in Britain is the Coptic Orthodox Church (originally a Monophysite body), known to many as a result of the spiritual growth being experienced in Egypt under its head, Pope Shenouda III. Others include the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Armenians and the Syrians. Collectively, these churches are often known as Oriental Orthodox churches, and there are global moves towards a healing of the divisions between them and the Chalcedonian Orthodox.⁴ Significantly, a Joint Commission produced a statement in 1990 which concluded that although the two sides had used Christological terms in different ways, they shared a common understanding of the Orthodox faith.

Visiting an Orthodox Church

As I have attempted to show, it is a mistake to view Orthodoxy in Britain solely as an 'ethnic' phenomenon; while the Liturgy is often celebrated in the traditional languages with which 'cradle Orthodox' are familiar, an increasing number of places have all or part of it celebrated in English, which makes a visit more enlightening. Of course, some congregations will be more welcoming than others, but if you accept the oft-repeated Orthodox contention that the Liturgy needs to be experienced through attendance at a service and not merely read on a page, you will notice some striking differences:

— there are few seats, members of the congregation standing or moving around, perhaps to light a candle in front of an icon or to greet someone. Men and women often occupy opposite sides of the church (on my first visit to an Orthodox service, it took me some minutes to realize that I was standing among the women!).

— the building is often dark, the air redolent with incense, and the walls appear cluttered with icons. However, everything in an Orthodox place of worship has a reason for being where (and how) it is, and it is worth spending time in order to understand all the architectural, liturgical and aesthetic symbolism.

— the whole service is much more physical than conservative Protestants are used to: movement of the clergy around the building, bodily gesture, sight and sound all play significant symbolic roles in what is seen as a re-enactment of salvation history. Yet, for all the complexity, there is also a surprising sense of informality: you can move around if you wish without drawing attention to yourself, and I recollect an occasion when, at the end of a naming (christening) ceremony, the priest was left literally 'holding the baby' and plaintively asked the congregation: 'Is anybody going to collect him?'

— there is an unhurried approach to worship; Mattins and the Liturgy together may take two or three hours, and the congregation seems quite ready to 'waste time with God'. Although it is not uncommon to see people arrive late or leave early (and doubtless they do not always have the best of reasons for doing so!), this must be seen in the light of the belief that worshipping in church is rather like tuning in to a radio programme: it began before you started to listen to it and will continue after you switch off, and when you attend a service you are 'tuning in' to the ongoing worship of heaven.

— the choir normally sings the responses on behalf of the congregation, whose participation is more a matter of action than speech or song (incidentally, I am not convinced that aesthetic reasons play too much of a part in the decision of most converts to become Orthodox; such considerations have relatively little weight in a small congregation in a less-than-ideal setting such as a hired room or hall).

If you are fortunate, you may be able to arrange to visit a local Orthodox priest or monk, although all jurisdictions in Britain are hampered by a severe shortage of clergy, and those who do exist may often have several widely-scattered congregations in their charge: as yet there is no seminary in Britain, although there are plans to establish an Orthodox study centre. Alternatively, you may know lay Orthodox who would be happy to talk to you about their faith and life. One thing is certain: Orthodoxy in Britain is here to stay. The flow of converts in both directions between Orthodoxy and

Protestantism will continue, and we need to take trouble to familiarise ourselves with the world of the 'Church of the Councils' and to keep abreast with developments therein.

Tim Grass was formerly the Pastor of Rehoboth Baptist Church, Horsham. He is currently a Distance Learning Tutor for both Spurgeon's College and the Open Theological College, and a freelance researcher.

Footnotes

1 This is not a peculiarly Orthodox problem: for a parallel from history, consider the attempts of Edward Irving and the Presbytery of London to ensure that Scots moving to the metropolis were not lost to the Kirk.

2 These figures are taken from the 1997 *Directory of Orthodox Parishes & Clergy in the British Isles* (Orthodox Fellowship of St. John the Baptist, 26 Denton Close, Botley, Oxford, OX2 9BW) which gives details of all Chalcedonian clergy and parishes, with times (and languages) of services.

3 To complicate matters further, most Russian Orthodox in France are under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

4 For further details, see the *UK Christian Handbook*.

Book Reviews

Biblical Studies

The Pundit's Folly

Sinclair Ferguson
Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1995,
88pp, £1.95, paperback,
ISBN 0-85151-676-9

This small book is, perhaps, best described as an evangelistic exposition of the book of Ecclesiastes. Rather than expounding Ecclesiastes verse by verse, or passage by passage, Dr Ferguson concentrates on the major themes of the book which he groups in four chapters.

Under Dr Ferguson's hand the narrator of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, or Qoheleth, if you prefer, is renamed 'the Pundit', hence the title. The book is, in one sense, a monument to his folly, or the folly of all men who seek meaning apart from God. What we have in Ecclesiastes are the 'memoirs', or 'chronicles' of the Pundit. The Pundit's quest for meaning, and his inability to find it apart from God is right up to date.

Chapter one deals with what the 'Pundit' had discovered about the futility of seeking for satisfaction and meaning in life apart from God. In his quest for

meaning the 'Pundit' was troubled by the apparent unfairness of life, and that for all — good or bad, wise or foolish — the end seems the same (Chapter 2). The answer to this problem is to be found in God whom, as sinful men and women, we can know through Christ, the wisdom of God (Chapter 3), and whom we must serve with reverent fear (Chapter 4).

This small volume will be found a useful aid, and an inspiration for teaching and preaching from this difficult and neglected Old Testament book.

The Review Editor
Sheffield