

Orthodox Identity and Culture: The Experience of a British Orthodox

No one should think he knows Christ if he is not a member of His body, that is, the Church

Saint Bede the Venerable, Commentary on the Gospel of St Luke

For its first thousand years or so the history of the Christian mission particularly in west is one of development and adaptation. As the Good News spread from the Holy Land it adapted to local cultures which emphasised different aspects of the faith in line with local characteristics. Whilst showing a great diversity in outward practice it maintained a unity of faith and a bond of love throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

The Church within the British Isles developed local codes of Church discipline which had more in common with Egyptian practice than that on the near continent. The monasteries of Wales and Ireland developed a practice of continual prayer like that of the Monasteries of the Unsleeping Ones in Constantinople. The larger churches and monasteries in Britain developed a practice of having several altars, where there would be a continuous, offering of the Eucharist throughout daylight hours, with one Eucharist at each altar each day. The British Church also developed local fasting practices which kept the Great Lent and pre-Christmas fasts, with a local custom of 'fasting' and 'abstinence' on the Vigils of the major feasts and those of the Apostles. The way that the local Church distinguished between 'fasting' and 'abstinence' also varied. I recall a Greek friend's shock when she heard the history of St Beuno, an ascetical monk and Apostle of North Wales. He ate only one egg a day during the whole of Great Lent, but nothing on Wednesdays or Fridays. 'How could he be a saint and ascetic when he did not keep the Fast?' she asked, 'He ate eggs in Lent!'

The difference between fasting and abstinence was perhaps more developed in the west. Fasting was considered as refraining from all foods for a specific time, usually until after Vespers with a reduction of the quantity of food taken. Abstinence was seen as refraining from eating certain classes of food but not necessarily the reduction in the quantity of food. The days of Great Lent and the pre-Christmas period were all seen as fasting days with some additional days of both fasting and abstinence. This fine distinction and the multiplicity of rules of fasting and abstinence probably led to the falling-away of their observance in the west at an earlier date than in the east.

The Calendars of local saints also reflected the ethnic variations. In Anglo-Saxon England the emphasis was on two types of saint: ascetic monastics and royal saints. The two were often combined in the same person where the sons or daughters of royal households became monastics. Martyrdom, witnessing to death, was less frequent in Britain than most other parts of the Roman Empire so although there are some conventional martyrs saints such as Alban in England and Julius and Aaron in Wales, the Anglo-Saxon martyr often bore a closer resemblance to the Russian 'Passion-Bearer'. The martyr kings Oswald and Edmund were not slain by pagans because of their Christianity but were Christian monarchs who were killed in the defence of their kingdom. In such ways the local character and history was reflected in the practice of the Christian faith.

Before the Great Schism, to be Orthodox was to be in Communion with the local bishop who was in communion with the local Patriarch. Christians on journeys abroad would attend the local church and receive the sacraments there without any hindrance. After the Great Schism the eastern (Orthodox) and western (Catholic) Churches shared less and less and each took on characteristics which were alien to the other.

Initially these differences were in the Divine Office, that is in services other than the Eucharist. The Offices, both east and west, contain the teaching of the Church. Much of the teaching of the Church is expressed within the canons of Orthros in the east and in the office hymns and patristic extracts at Matins in the west, together with the Praises at Vespers and Lauds and the antiphons of the other Hours.

At the same time as the composition of instructive canons in the east, the west increased its variety and scope of its poetic hymnody. In the west there was the *lectio continua* of the Old and New Testaments and the weekly recitation of the Psalter. While the East retained the reading of the entire New Testament at the Liturgy the Old Testament lessons were reduced to those in Lent and very few selections at festal Vespers. The west retained a more general reading of both Old and New Testaments, and after the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century these took on an increased prominence.

Another consequence of the Reformation in the west was the increase in theological hymnody. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic writers produced hymns that presented to the faithful their interpretation of the faith of the Church as they saw it. In the Reformed Churches this was accompanied by an increasing use of the vernacular and the presentation to the people of the dogmas of faith in contemporary language that was readily understood by the congregation. The theological disputes in the market place of Antioch and Constantinople, noted by St John Chrysostom in the fifth century, were repeated in the sixteenth century by the Reformers in the market places of the west in Geneva and London.

With the religious revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the west, popular hymns in the vernacular, with easily sung tunes and rousing emotional emphasis, were composed. Congregational participation in the conduct of services, and in the Roman Catholic Church the reintroduction of vernacular worship after the Second Vatican Council, meant that all mainstream western churches used hymnody together with preaching as their main ways of promoting doctrine. This background of congregational singing of metrical hymns and the hearing of both the Old and New Testament Bible readings at services is that with which most people coming into the Orthodox Church in the west will be familiar. For the most part they will enter congregations that are either basically ethnic and conservative in practice, with services in Church Slavonic or Church Greek, or which are very small and are in some ways trying too hard to prove they are Orthodox and become very strict in adhering to what they see as the norms of Eastern Orthodox worship. However, in many cases they pick up least helpful aspects of *ethnic traditions* whilst retaining a view of the clergy that is over clerical and western.

While differences in the outward expression of the faith are present between the varied national Orthodox traditions they all basically retain the Byzantine shape and language forms. These differences, within a basically Byzantine format, can often seem to be only grudgingly accepted by Orthodox of another tradition, while the differences between western traditions and eastern traditions are not accepted, or are assigned to fringe groups of 'western-rite' Orthodox. Unfortunately these western-rite Orthodox Liturgies are only practised by presbyters with no canonical western-rite Orthodox bishops. From an ecclesiological point of view this is an irregular position as the presbyter says the Liturgy of his bishop, the normative minister of the Eucharistic Liturgy.

Where, then, does this leave western Christians who have come into the Orthodox Church? Do they have to put to one side their early Christian formation? The encouragement of the use of the vernacular with congregational participation, praised by the early Fathers but now not *traditional*, has to be re-established. The choir should be there to help with congregational involvement, and only to sing alone the parts that in the ancient liturgies are designated for the reader. Some of the canons at Orthros contain material that in the original Greek is metrical but when translated becomes prose. The content of some of the festal canons is the same as that of many of the older western hymns and it is feasible that the canons could be so translated and arranged that they could be sung as metrical hymns. In the Synaxis the Entrance hymns and the Verses and Responses between the Litanies lend themselves to hymnody. Since no objection is raised to the Slav practice of replacing the antiphons with psalms, nor to the common Greek practice of omitting the verses, why should their replacement with hymnody be thought of as objectionable? The changing of the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom or St Basil for a western-rite liturgy is inappropriate so long as there are no western-rite bishops but the use of hymns to replace some of the chants could be effected without creating an anomalous position. The hymns used would need some careful inspection to ensure that the doctrine contained in them is consistent with the faith but this should be done with any texts used in the services of the Church and applies equally to translations. The reintroduction of Old Testament readings either at daily Vespers or at the Eucharist should be seriously considered as many Orthodox are deprived of any systematic hearing of the Old Testament.

I have outlined what I see as the position of Orthodox Christians in the west: they are divorced from the historical Christian background that has shaped their culture and they are expected to participate in a style of worship that has developed within a very different society.

Life within the Orthodox Church is not easy for an adult who has previously been active within a western Christian tradition. My wife and I were received together as Orthodox; she committed herself deeply to life as a member of the Orthodox Church, and learnt sufficient Church Greek and Slavonic to take a full part in the services, sometimes even leading the singing. She joys in all the rich treasures she has been given by her Orthodoxy but has found it beyond her strength to cope with the problems we both experienced - the denial of a Christian heritage, dealing with unfamiliar cultures and the mindsets which they can sometimes engender. Now, after thirteen years, she has returned to her western Christian roots, and we are learning together how to live out our inter-Church marriage. It is against this background that Thanasis asked me to write this article when I said to him, 'The greatest strength and the greatest weakness of the Orthodox Churches is Nationalism'.

M.R.Bede Gerrard, Oxford, October 2002

Sources

D. Hurst (ed.), *Bede, Commentary on St Luke* (Bedae Venerabilis Opera. Pars 11 Opera Exegetica, vol. 3, CCSL, CXX, *In Lucae Evangelium Exposito*) (Turnholt, 1960), p.417 The quotation may be found in Book 6 of *Bede's Commentary*

R Boenig, *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality: Selected Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (Paulist Press: New York, 2000)

L Shirley-Price (tr.), *Bede: History of the English Church and People* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1968)

Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland* (MacMillan & Co: Oxford, 1869-73)

The Divine Liturgy for Clergy and Laity, Text and Music for Congregational Participation (Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 2000)

R Nelson, *Nelson's Festivals & Fasts* (SPCK: London, 1841)

P Kinbrough, *Orthodox & Wesleyan Spirituality* (SVSP: New York, 2001)

Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin: London, 1999) (revised edition)

J W Morris, *Orthodox Fundamentalists: A Critical View* (Light & Life Publishing: Michigan, 1999)

Biographical note

I am an Englishman brought up in a Christian family in England who was received into the Orthodox Church as an adult by a Welsh monk who was a priest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain. The main reason that I became Orthodox was that I was expected to believe what I said and heard in church. Tonsured as a Reader by Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, I regularly serve at the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church in Oxford. After taking early retirement I now work as County Ecumenical Officer for Oxfordshire, encouraging good relations between the Christian denominations in the county and working to bring nearer the time when the Church responds to Christ's prayer that 'They may all be one...that the world may believe.'

**Et sic eum non nisi in fractione panis agnoscerent, ne quisquam se Christum agnovisse arbitretur, si eius corporis particeps non est, id est ecclesiae, cuius unitatem in sacramento panis commendat Apostolus dicens: Unus panis, unum corpus multi sumus' (1 Cor. 10:17).*

And as they do not know Him in the breaking of the Bread, no one should think he knows Christ if he is not a member of His Body, that is, the Church, whose unity in the sacrament of the Bread is commended by the Apostle when he says: Though we are many, we are one bread, one body.

D. Hurst (ed.), Bede, *Commentary on St Luke* (Bedaе Venerabilis Opera. Pars 11 Opera Exegetica, vol. 3, CCSL, CXX, *In Lucae Evangelium Exposito*) (Turnholt, 1960), p.417 The quotation may be found in Book 6 of Bede's *Commentary*