

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN GREAT BRITAIN¹

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One of the most remarkable facts about the scenario of Church life in Great Britain in recent decades has been the growth of the Orthodox Church, especially in England, which is now the third largest Church in the land, next to the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. This clearly calls for some reflection not only from the other Churches but from the Orthodox Church itself about its mission and vocation within the life and context of a Country which has been massively influenced by the Reformation, but within which there is still a strong representation of the Roman Catholic Church, which stands for about ten percent of the population. The general ethos of Christian life and national culture in Britain, however, is dominated by the Evangelical Churches: Anglican, Reformed, and Methodist.

The purpose of this article, written at the invitation of Archbishop Methodios, is to offer some first reflections from a non-Orthodox theologian on what the contribution of the vigorous Orthodox Church in Great Britain might be. But first let me say to Orthodox readers a few things about what the Reformation has meant for us in Europe.

The Great Reformers were committed to restoring what they called "the face of the Ancient Catholic Church," which had been so obscured through the political Christianity and politicized theology of the Western Latin Church. For various reasons which I will not detail here there had arisen in the West a double concept of the Church as "mystical body" and as "juridical institution," but these two aspects of the Church were tied together through a massive corpus of canon law which gave the Roman Catholic Church a severely monolithic character in the form of a great hierarchical structure in which all authority was devolved from a concrete center of Primacy; which Orthodox theologians have described as "Caesaropapalism." In the course of the Middle Ages, when the Church in the

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West became the great bastion of culture and unity, the Roman Church became increasingly invested with secular power which it sought to use for spiritual ends but which frankly had the effect of distorting and politicizing "the face of the Catholic Church" and obscuring the Christ-centered nature of the Church as the Body of Christ.

The Reformation was an attempt against the hard structure of Roman canon law to recover the essential nature and form of the ancient Catholic Church by calling for a Christological correction of its doctrinal innovations and its ecclesiastical structure. For it called for a recovery of the evangelical doctrine of justification by grace (nowhere better expounded in all the history of theology than by the impeccably orthodox Cyril of Alexandria), a liberation of the doctrine and practice of the Eucharist from the hard crust of Aristotelian notions of causality, and an emancipation of the ministry and the nature of its authority from the patterns assimilated into the Church from the Roman Empire and its replacement by the ancient patristic and conciliar concept of ministry and authority through communion or *koinonia* which took an essentially corporate form. The Reformation took place, however, at the very time when, in reaction to pressures of "the Holy Roman Empire," the forces of nationalism everywhere took the field, with the result that the attempt to reform the Church from a center in Christ and his Gospel became trapped within the nationalistic divisions and rivalries and the nationalistic structures of civil law that now became the dominant feature of Europe. All this took place, however, without any significant relation to the Eastern Orthodox Church from which the Roman Catholic Church had cut itself off and from which therefore Western Christendom had been cut off for many centuries.

Now at last, however, that lack of balance in the Reformation can be redressed through the presence of a powerful and theologically significant representative Orthodox Church in Great Britain. Of course the Anglican and Reformed Church particularly had paid great attention to the Greek Fathers, but that was to their teaching in a *detached form*. Now, however, they have in their midst the doctrine of the Ancient Catholic Church in an embodied form in the worshipping life and ministry of the Orthodox Church, which cannot but have a very far-reaching effect upon the whole life and thought of the Church in this country. How do I as a Reformed Churchman and theologian view the contribution which the Orthodox Community can make to us all in Britain? In the rest of this article let me offer only a few thoughts about the possibilities.

1. The Orthodox Church stands for the fact that the worship, life, and mission of the Church are inseparably bound up with the truth of Christ as it has come

to expression above all in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and in the great Conciliar statements based upon it. It is that inner relation between ministry, life, and the essential truth of the Trinitarian Faith that the very term *Orthodox* refers to. The British Churches, on the other hand, are thoroughly pragmatic in their outlook, with little real sense of the practical relevance of doctrine, with the result that the leadership of the Churches is severely wanting in theological power. This is very evident, for example, in the theological deficiency of Anglican bishops or of Free Church leaders, but is no less evident in the Roman Catholic Church which does not have any really significant theologians in our country. Now it would seem to me that it is precisely at this point that the Orthodox Church can do something very important and helpful: by injecting into the heart of our Church life, and not least of our inter-Church relations, the fundamental questions of "faith and order" by drawing out the implications of the Ancient Creeds and Councils for the continual reform of our daily life and worship under the control of the Apostolic Faith and interpretation of Christ and his Gospel. The rehabilitation of Nicene theology and of theological thinking in Britain would be an incalculable contribution for the Orthodox Church to make to us, and when better than under the leadership of such a powerful theologian and scholar such as the Orthodox Church now has in his Eminence Archbishop Methodios?

2. Tied up with this is another characteristic of the Orthodox Church, the ability to defend the faith against attacks from without and heresies from within. It is quite clear that since the emergence of sociological forces which have tended to disrupt culture, pluralize society, and politicize the Church in recent decades that there is widespread confusion about Christian belief, even among leading Churchmen, as when for example we have Bishops and Professors of Christian theology who seem to deny some of the essential truths of the Faith such as the reality of the Incarnation, the Deity of Christ, or the uniqueness of the Christian message in the face of other religions. Here the Orthodox Church can bring to us help out of her long tradition in defending the faith against the distortions of heresy, the menaces to the very substance of the Gospel from dualist ways of thinking such as from the ancient Gnostics, and against the forces of Islam when the Orthodox Church stood alone for many centuries as the bastion of Christianity, but this applies also to the defense of the Gospel against the militant materialism so rampant in Marxist societies and countries. Every Church, of course, through the changing cultures of the world in which it passes becomes conditioned by cultural patterns which often obscure the Faith when non-essential ideas are thrust into the center, but the Orthodox Church, which has certainly not been uninfluenced by alien culture, e.g., of the Turkish empire,

has learned to distinguish the truths that are utterly central and essential, and to show that they must be defended at all costs, or else the Church will perish. That is what we need in Britain today. In the seventeenth century one of our greatest theologians, John Forbes of Corse, put his finger on this very point as one of the great features of the Greek Church, and discussed what we might learn from it in the Church of Scotland. Now we can learn through direct contact with our Orthodox brethren the lessons which God has taught them through long and painful history – and we need them desperately, not only in our Universities, but in our parishes and everyday life.

3. One of my own special interests has been the way in which the Greek Fathers found that they had to reconstruct the foundations of Greek philosophy and science, as well as religion, if the Christian Gospel was to take root in human society. In the course of that radical work they so altered the foundations of thought that they opened up the way for the great development of modern empirical science. Now as we look back we find that some of them even anticipated modern scientific understanding of space and time and the physics of light upon which all our scientific knowledge rests. Thus I have long since come to the conclusion that the theology most relevant to our modern scientific world was that which goes back to Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria and to the first great Christian physicist, John Philoponos of Alexandria. But the sad thing is that most of the works of Cyril and of Philoponos are not available to us in English. Not all their works survive in Greek, some only in other languages such as Syriac, but most of them do survive in Greek. Now it is right here, I suggest, that the Orthodox Community in Great Britain could perform a signal service for us all in the English-speaking world by translating and publishing the most important of these magnificent writings in to English. This really needs people for whom Greek is a living language, as they could undertake this task much more quickly, but it needs to be done in conjunction with others whose mother tongue is English. If this were done, it would have a beneficial effect not just upon theologians but upon scientists who are now looking for the basic roots of their understanding of nature and which they are beginning to recognize come from the Judaeo-Christian understanding of the created universe.

4. Turning back to the Church itself again, I would like to offer another line of thought. Everywhere today Churches find that they need to rethink the legal structures in which they have unavoidably been entangled. For example, the Roman Catholic Church found after the second Vatican Council that it had to “update canon law” to take in the *aggiornamento* which had so marvelously

been carried through in the early years of the nineteen-sixties. But when they did this, in what was called the *lex fundamentalis ecclesiae*, they found that this way of updating the canon law had the effect of rubbing out nearly all the significant features of the Second Vatican Council, and so they scrapped it, and started again. What needs to be done is to rethink the very foundations of the law of the Church in such a way that the law is made to serve the Gospel and not to suffocate or dominate it. My own Church, the Church of Scotland, has the same problem; for the older a Church gets the more it tends to be tied to the precedents of the past, to become an *ekklesia presbyterica* rather than an *ekklesia neotera*! Now here, I believe, the Orthodox Church has a very special contribution to make by showing how it is through communion, that is through internal relations in the Spirit to Christ, and so to one another in Christ, that authority in the Church is shared, and shared in such a way that it takes a corporate spiritual form, and not a legalistic, hierarchical form imposed from above upon the faith and life of the members of the Church. This will take a lot of very hard work, rethinking the doctrines of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and showing how that must work out in the Church as the living Body of Christ, the "communion of saints." The practical implications of this for the liberation of the Church from obsolescent "traditions of men," as our Lord called them, would be immense, and would bring a great deal of fresh air into the Church when we could reorder our life in ways that make it more open and relevant to a world where under God our science is teaching much more of the dynamic structures of the creation where God has placed us and called us to serve him. This is doubtless one of the points where the Orthodox Church herself needs to do some domestic rethinking and reshaping!

5. Another suggestion I would like to make is that a simplified form of the Orthodox Liturgy would make a very fertile contribution to many other Churches today – I am thinking particularly at the moment of non-Anglican Churches such as the Reformed Church in which a strong theological liturgy would be appreciated, which would fit into its historic emphasis upon the *epiclesis* and the *de fide* nature of the Church. But the Orthodox liturgy has another outstanding feature which all Churches need to take into account, the emphasis upon the resurrection. Owing to the Latin and Roman tradition which has dominated all western Churches, Evangelical as well as Catholic, the celebration of the Eucharist is cut short at communion in the body and blood of Christ, while the celebration of the risen and ascended Lord, the place of his heavenly Intercession in the one Church that worships and surrounds the enthroned Lamb, tends to be left out of account. The Reformed Church sought in a measure to counteract this,

e.g. in replacing the Crucifix by the Cross which represents the risen Lord, but it nevertheless got trapped within the truncation of the Eucharist passed on to it from the Medieval Roman Church. Change here could not take place without fresh, hard thinking on the theology of the Eucharist and the theology of the Liturgy, and here, once again, I myself believe we can get more and profounder help from Cyril than from Basil and Chrysostom – but Cyril’s writings, as I have said, are not available, apart from two or three, in English. I would suggest that a small group of Orthodox and Reformed Churchmen working at this on theological grounds could do something very significant. But Orthodox theologians and Churchmen should be aware of the tendency of non-Orthodox, e.g. Anglicans, to latch on to Orthodox spirituality without its deep-rooted theology and therefore only in a sort of sentimental way that is not very helpful to anyone.

6. Let me make one final point, which applies equally to the Orthodox themselves as well as the non-Orthodox: the need to rethink at a much deeper level the *doctrine of the Virgin Mary*. As I understand it this would involve a deep-seated reconsideration of the relation between Christians and Jews in the one Church in which both Jews and Christians have access to God the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, but in which “Gentiles” (“Greeks,” in the New Testament term!) share in the One People of God through incorporation into “the Commonwealth of Israel,” as St. Paul insisted so strongly. This is an area of Christian theology and tradition in which Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed have had to do a lot of thinking, but in which the Orthodox Church has so far done very little. So far as the blessed Virgin Mary is concerned, when the Christian Church is detached from the People of Israel as also of the one Church of God, then Mary becomes detached from her organic relation to Israel and becomes attached to Mediterranean ideas such as “the Queen of heaven” which have no relation to the Holy Scriptures. This does not apply, of course to the Theotokos, but the Theotokos must be understood in relation to the fact that in the purpose of God it was Israel which gave birth to Jesus as the Messiah, and Mary was the chosen representative of Israel in that incarnational event. Hence Mary has to be related to the “vicarious” mission of Israel in the mediating of divine revelation to mankind, and becomes misunderstood when detached from it. I stress this fact as it is now clearly incumbent upon the Church to think through the relations of Church to Israel and move toward the healing of the deepest schism in the one people of God, recovering the doctrine as Epiphanius expressed it that “Jerusalem is the mother of the faithful.” I believe that if we can do this then we shall be able to reach that fullness of reconciliation of which St. Paul wrote to the Romans through which the whole world will eventually be

reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. It is the Orthodox Church, which has always stood for the great soteriological principle that "the unassumed is the unhealed," which can, I believe, fulfill the part of catalyst in bringing the understanding of the whole Church together at this point. Perhaps I may commend in this connection the book recently put out by my brother D. W. Torrance, *The Witness of the Jews to God* (The Handsel Press, Edinburgh), which is one of the first books to take seriously a theological approach to understanding the relations of Church and Israel.