

# WHAT'S ORTHODOXY, ANYWAY? (OR, MY JOURNEY TO ORTHODOXY)

Teresa Peneguy Paprock

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I'm an Orthodox Christian. It's an easy thing for me to say, but harder to explain. Most people don't know what Orthodox Christianity is, or they think they know but they have some false notions. Until I met my husband, I was only vaguely aware of Orthodoxy and I figured the Orthodox were sort of like the Amish - old fashioned, out-of-it.

Usually, the first question people have about Orthodox Christianity is, 'What IS it?'. It's a good question because Orthodoxy is very different from the other two families of Christianity, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. As a former Protestant (I was raised Methodist and became Lutheran in high school), I felt like I had discovered a well-kept secret when I started learning about Orthodoxy. Lots of Protestants have felt that way.

The second question is, Why did you decide to become Orthodox?. The answers to that are dynamic, growing in number each day.

To over-simplify, I chose to become Orthodox when I discovered my Protestant faith could not provide the spiritual depth I had been seeking all of my life. (I say this for me, only; one's personal faith is between only him and God, and I'm not saying that Protestantism isn't right for other people.) By the time I was in my early 30s I had attended Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Catholic, UCC, and Quaker churches, read a ton of books, and even become - born again, but I felt as if I hadn't gotten any closer what I was looking for (and I wasn't even sure what that was).

When I met John-Brian, who later became my husband, and learned he was Orthodox, I didn't really know what that meant. When he took me to a service at one of the churches where we live, I was overwhelmed (as are most Protestants their first time) by the incense, the candles, the chanting, and the icons. I was intrigued, but I didn't think that Orthodoxy was for me. Frankly, it seemed out of my grasp.

Meanwhile I was explaining to my friends that the man I was dating wasn't Jewish, and didn't belong to some new cult. I didn't blame them for asking questions. I was (and still am) more than a little suspicious of people who are overtly religious, because I've learned from experience that just because someone claims to be 'religious' doesn't mean they're good,

nice, or honest! Unfortunately, it's hard to trust the veracity of a religion by the people who say they believe - although it would be easier if this were the case.

## **A LONG JOURNEY**

In addition, I had a lot of questions about Christianity that had never been answered. Was God really still so angry about Adam and Eve and an apple that He was still sending people to hell thousands of years later? Were we really all born under the curse of Original Sin? Why did God need the sacrifice of His son in order to forgive people? What about people of other faiths? How could so many churches all claim to 'Follow the Bible' and yet be so different from each other? And could I believe in scientific evidence that the earth and mankind had developed over millions of years and still be a Christian?

It seemed to me that liberal Christianity answered these questions by suggesting that Jesus was a wonderful teacher but not much more than that, and that conservative Christianity answered them by pointing out that we are sinners and should not even be asking the questions at all! I was uncomfortable with both approaches, so for a long time, I didn't attend any church. I did not find myself drawn to Unitarianism (too mushy, I thought) or to other religions. I just gave up for a while.

My journey to Orthodox Christianity took a while (it always does; Orthodoxy does not supply black-and-white or simplistic answers and so it's not a religion that expects split-second conversion). I did a lot of reading, especially *The Orthodox Way* by Bishop Kallistos Ware (this book has probably resulted in more conversions to Orthodoxy than any other book). Houston Smith explains in *The Religions of Man*, Eastern (Orthodoxy) considers the issues on which unanimity is needed to be far fewer in number than does the Roman (Catholic) Church, so there is a range of opinion and expression within Orthodoxy (so there are no official Orthodox stances on issues in science, politics, etc.). I liked some of what I read, and disliked some of it, but I definitely discovered a different Christianity than I'd known before. At that point, I would say, it wasn't so much that I chose the faith, but that the faith chose me.

## **A GAME OF "PASSWORD"**

I had long thought of Christian theology as sort of a game of Password, where each person whispers something to the next, and by the end (2000 years later) it sounds completely different. Because every church seemed to have different answers, I wanted to find out what early Christianity was like. Like a lot of Protestants, I had thought that the Evangelical or free churches represented a return to the earliest Christianity. In reality, their theology and their manner of worship are relatively new (not that there is anything wrong with it, many people find great sustenance in these churches, but it isn't how the earliest Christians worshipped).

The first Christians worshipped liturgically, like the Jews (because for the most part, they were Jews). They celebrated the sacraments, and used incense and candles. Most importantly, they followed - and passed on - oral tradition. The Bible as we know it did not exist until the Fourth or Fifth Century, and even then, it was not widely available until the printing press was invented. Therefore oral tradition was extremely important to early Christians, just as important as the Bible is today. The Orthodox Church still follows this oral tradition, and its priests are ordained by a laying-on of hands that began with the Apostles. I had found the original source of my game of Password!

I found out that many of the issues that had bothered me were the result of ideas that had developed after a few hundred years of the game. For example, the Church had always believed mankind was fallen (imperfect), but it wasn't until the Fourth Century that Augustine developed the dogma of Original Sin, or inherited guilt, that essentially maintains that all people are damned from birth. I discovered that the Orthodox believe that mankind does suffer due to sin, but that their overall view of mankind and of God's creation is still positive. Once I learned this, other things started falling into place for me.

I had not been satisfied with a faith that focused on getting saved. To me, a living Christian faith had to be about so much more than that. In Orthodoxy, salvation is a journey, a lifelong process, rather than a one-time event. While in this life, Orthodox believers don't claim they are already saved 'but on the other side of the coin, they don't believe that they can say who is not saved'. In other words, as many Orthodox say, We know where the Holy Spirit is, but not where it is not. As an Orthodox Christian, I accept that Jesus Christ is the savior of all humanity, not just of those with a belief system just like my own. I cannot say that people of other faiths cannot be saved, because God is infinite. It is me who has limitations, not God.

Since so many people have asked me, 'Do Orthodox use the Bible?', I have to answer, 'Well, we wrote it!' The Orthodox understand the Bible as the Word of God, but we base our interpretations on the understanding of the Church (the collective and mystical body of worshippers). We are comfortable with paradox and mystery in a way many other faiths are not. For example, the Orthodox don't spend a lot of time debating between Creationism and Evolution because to us, they don't need to be mutually exclusive. The Bible is interpreted historically, allegorically, and metaphysically. God is big enough.

## **A DEEPER FAITH**

And what about Jesus' death on the Cross? What did it mean? In Orthodoxy I discovered that to say simply that God had to sacrifice his son in order to forgive mankind is an oversimplification. If we truly believe that Christ was and is God (as it says in the Nicene Creed), then we realize that it was God Himself who suffered on the Cross. And for the Orthodox, that suffering isn't so much a payment or an appeasement (God would be appeasing God, if that were true), but rather an astounding connection between humanity

and divinity. Orthodox say that God became man so that man could become (like) God.

Bishop Ware says, Hell is not a point in space but in the soul. It is the place where God is not (and yet God is everywhere!) If Christ truly descended into hell' (as it says in the Creed), that means he descended into the depths of the absence of God. Totally, unreservedly, he identified himself with all man's anguish and alienation. He assumed it into himself, and by assuming it he healed it. There was no other way he could heal it, except by making it his own. At the same time, we should not say that Christ has suffered instead of us,' but rather than he has suffered on our behalf. The Son off God suffered unto death,' not that we might be exempt from suffering, but that our suffering might be like his. Christ offers us, not a way round suffering, but a way through it; not substitution, but saving companionship.

### **CHRIST IS RISEN!**

As I write this, we are preparing for the Great Fast. For six weeks, from now until Easter, we Orthodox will eat neither meat nor dairy of any kind. It's a reminder that 'Orthodoxy ain't for wimps.' When I was Methodist or Lutheran it was easy to forget it was Lent; now, I remember every minute. But the Great Fast isn't about legalism, I could eat a cheeseburger if I wanted to (but I don't want to). The Great Fast, like everything else in Orthodoxy, is about ever growing closer to God.

On Easter morning, just after midnight after a week of long services, we will sing, 'Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!' We will be thankful for what God did on our behalf, and we'll remember that He defeated death for us. There will still be a place for bunny rabbits and chocolate eggs, but our celebration will be about something deeper. It will be about something deeper than just knowing that we're saved, or that we have the 'right' faith and people of other faiths are 'wrong.' It will be deeper than a church service that is enjoyable but doesn't bear any resemblance to the worship of antiquity. For us it will be about connecting to the Source of all, the One who came so that we might live, the One who gave us not only the words but the traditions, and the One who showed us the Way.

#### **Some websites of interest :**

<http://www.angelfire.com/wi/inroads/transfig.html> Our church's website (and lots of links about Orthodoxy and other stuff)

<http://www.orthodoxunity.org/> A website for those interested in healing the division between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is one of the Oriental Orthodox churches.

<http://www.skete.com/> Order icons here! The Skete is not far from us, and is a beautiful place with wonderful people.

<http://www.theoniondome.com/> No, Orthodox Humor is not an oxymoron. This website features Orthodox Christian satire.

[http://www.oca.org/pages/orth\\_chri/Q-and-A\\_OLD/Meeting-the-Orthodox.html#9](http://www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/Q-and-A_OLD/Meeting-the-Orthodox.html#9) An

excellent list of Q&As for inquirers into the Orthodox Church

<http://www.incommunion.org/> Another website promoting peace and unity between the various Orthodox churches

<http://ship-of-fools.com/> The Magazine of Christian Unrest - Christian satire

<http://www.angelfire.com/wi/theosis/theosis.html> <http://www.bethel.edu/rakrob/files/THEOSIS2.htm>  
Two explanations of "theosis"