

Orthodox Christianity for Adults



Exploring Orthodox Christian faith and life

– why the Orthodox are distinctively different

People come to explore Orthodox Christian faith and life for many different reasons, from a plurality of backgrounds and with a host of varied questions. Each person has his or her own spiritual path and onward journey. The Orthodox Church recognises and welcomes all people without exception and with their own questions. We invite you to familiarise yourself with what we believe as Orthodox Christians and how we live. For most enquirers there will be a need for a priest or catechist to explore challenging or difficult aspects of faith and life. One of the most important starting points for all seekers is to understand that, notwithstanding certain superficial similarities between Orthodoxy and other Christian traditions, Orthodox Christianity, once you penetrate below the surface of things, is radically different from them all. For example, the two-word declaration: “Christ saves” would be endorsed by most, if not all, religious groups claiming to be Christian. However, the following questions could follow on and Orthodoxy would give a very different answer to what might be expected for each:

1. What does it mean to “save”?
2. What does Christ save us from?
3. Why does He save each of us?
4. What about the Father and the Holy Spirit? Are they involved somehow? I thought Christians believed in one God. What happened to God when Christ died on the cross?
5. What was our condition before salvation began and what is our condition now? Is salvation in the past, the present and the future different in some way? What shall we be like at the end of the process? Rewinding these questions, is there even a process involved; isn't it all just a “done deal”?
6. Who does Christ save? ... the elect, the whole world, good people, bad people, who?

Broadly speaking, and notwithstanding the differences, Roman Catholic (second Millennium manifestation) and Protestant Christianity share much more between each other in answering these questions than both do with Orthodoxy. If you count yourself already a Christian, and you come to explore Orthodoxy, please be aware that you may have much to unlearn before you can start afresh and look at Christianity in a radically different way. To speak bluntly, Orthodoxy is not: “old-fashioned pre-Second Council Catholicism without the Pope (as some genuinely think); nor is Orthodoxy: “Jesus is my Saviour with conservative ethics and extra liturgical bits (as others suppose). Orthodoxy is not only a completely different “package”, but it is also the original apostolic version of Christianity before the Latin tradition in the second millennium mangled it with various heresies, distortions, and corruptions.

This is *not* to say that the Orthodox Church is perfect in its members, all of whom have an excellent prospect of salvation, whereas all the rest are little better than baptised pagans and have no grace or

connection to Christ. This is *not* what the Orthodox Church teaches about herself or other Christian traditions. We are generally agnostic about those other Christian traditions - what we kindly call the 'heterodox' - Greek for "otherwise believing." We rejoice when they confess and live according to standards comparable to our own and we simply mourn when they do not, but we absolutely refrain from passing judgement upon them, a prerogative belonging only to God who nonetheless loves them dearly, as He does all humans (Christians or not) and creation itself. Rejoice and focus on the good in all.

Classic mistakes to be avoided!

(with a pertinent example from the social order)

A consequence of this teaching, if you are approaching Orthodox Christianity from a heterodox Christian tradition, is that your reasons for taking Orthodoxy seriously must be positive rather than negative. What is it that draws you to this faith and life? This positive evaluation of Orthodoxy is your starting point instead of merely reacting against something else that repels you. Do you really know what you are reaching out for in its fullness, or is this simply a selective appropriation of those elements of Orthodoxy that are opposite to or absent from your previous religious affiliation - cherry picking selectively what you may not have understood very deeply?

Let's take an example. If someone thinks that the Orthodox Church is a haven of rest from political and social engagement, simply because the Church places so much apparent emphasis on liturgy and personal transformation, (which is true, in part), then that person would be deceiving both themselves and God (who cannot be deceived). Even a cursory reading of the 8th century Old Testament prophets would reveal that God really does care about society and how we order it from an

economic and humanitarian perspective; enlightened and enlivened of course by faith and an obedient life (Amos 2:6-7 and many other references). Orthodoxy, fully lived, does indeed have profound social and political implications. That does not mean that Orthodoxy aligns itself with left wing or right-wing politics. It is far more radical than either of these, and often misunderstood by both. Please do not be one of those people who fails to grasp this. The Scriptures are our witness. One example will suffice.

The Fall is an ever present reality for human beings. The consequences of the Fall are both social and personal. Let us start with the most deeply personal aspect. Cain was the first to commit fratricide; he killed his own brother, Abel, in a fit of jealous rage. God then asked him (for his sake not God's of course) where Abel was. Cain replied: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9). Orthodoxy replies with a thunderous 'yes': "indeed Lord! ... we are our brothers' keepers, our sisters' keepers, our children's keepers; for our own salvation lies in those naked ones whom we clothe, feed and take in." (Matthew 25:34-36).

To say that we only discharge this responsibility before God at a personal level, and that it is OK then to care little, if anything at all, about the kind of society we should be proud to live in, is not at all defensible from a Christian point of view. It is indeed a Godly task to strive to create a society without food banks and beggars on the street—a society with laws to protect the stranger in our midst, to protect and rescue children suffering neglect and abuse and to make social provision for health, education, and welfare. Anyone who has become well acquainted with the Scriptures, the Fathers and the Saints knows this to be true. St Basil the Great and his New City foundation springs to mind! ¹

¹ <https://incommunion.org/2008/12/07/building-the-new-city-st-basils-social-vision/>

The Misconceptions of Agnosticism and Atheism

Starting in the Right Place

Of course, you might be exploring Orthodoxy because, until now, you have been either a convinced atheist, an agnostic inclined towards atheism, or an agnostic accepting all religions as potentially having some value, but not personally committed to one exclusively. In all states of spiritual progress (or regress!) some will come to Orthodoxy as a “clean slate.” However, even in these circumstances, they may probably think that Orthodoxy has the same answers as other Christians do, and the rest is just a matter of taste. They would be wrong with that idea, seriously wrong! Let us examine why that might be so.

An atheist will probably think that no one in their right mind would seriously have an “invisible friend”. Invariably they would expect an Orthodox Christian to start from a supposedly commonly held position: “well, you obviously don’t know Jesus.” However, that begs a lot of other questions that atheists immediately draw from their library of texts debunking religion, for example: “there is no credible proof that Jesus ever existed let alone rose from the dead”. Now they might expect us to chase them down that rabbit hole, but the Orthodox would generally not do this. We start from a very different point and say: “is there *anything* you might hold to be invisible?” After that we might invite them to reframe the question (away from Jesus in fact!) and explore what or who they might accept as being “real” in the first place and what their criteria are for accepting *anything* to be real.

Philosophy has often been a useful handmaid to theology because it establishes a language and a process with which to approach deep questions. The starting point for any such questions, however, must always be established first. This is the work of apologetics, not a

substitute for faith exploration, but its support in the initial stages. As one famous Irish joke has it - when a farmer was asked at an unmarked crossroad - “which way to Cork?” - the reply was heard: - “if I was going to Cork, I would not be starting from here!”

In our own lives we all, of course, have to start from where we are now, but at this point we need to consider, am I in fact at the right starting point? We can then begin to plan how to get to our destination on the right road and with help from true spiritual guides in the Church.

Making Progress on the Road to God

In practical terms, no matter where you are coming from, what your background is, what your questions are and what intentions and hopes you have or do not have, you are welcome to explore Orthodox Christian faith and life with us, as a worshipping and serving community, neglecting neither aspect. Orthodoxy cannot be learned from books alone. So much of what we hold dear is not actually in books and how we live is as important as what we confess to be true.

Do you then have an open mind and heart to let your discoveries of faith and life within the Orthodox Church challenge you to re-examine and explore every facet of Christianity, whether in partial or total ignorance of that fullness in Orthodoxy, or as a well-informed person perhaps, being challenged to make this way of life your own?

Take your time, but if and when you are resolved to enter into the Church, then please hasten to your priest or catechist without delay and say: “I must become a catechumen”. Please, do not prevaricate with God!

Becoming a Catechumen

“So, what is a catechumen?” Literally this means, “one who is being taught or instructed”. Now you may think, is not this what I have been doing already, exploring Christian faith and life? Well, to some extent this may be true, but when you are a catechumen the spiritual climb becomes steeper. It is now that you are not just wandering through Christianity without direction; now you have a goal: to become an Orthodox Christian!

This process in the catechumenate requires formal instruction, systematically exploring true faith and right practice, both Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy. You are in the position of a student, for example, of the martial arts. You will receive teaching and training in the art of self-denial, taking up your cross and following Christ. Your instructor will show you how to fight against your own worst self, employing all the gifts of grace and the power of God in prayer and receiving frequently the Holy Mysteries or Sacraments of the Church in order to achieve your best self, which is what God created you to be. This will require discipline, attention, humility, great faith and obedience to God’s will.

Perseverance in your Path

In your search, you must not waver, because if you fall by the wayside the judgement upon you will be greater than if you never embarked upon this journey. If now you shrink back in fear, you will refuse the greatest gift of God’s love which is to know Him personally and to serve Him in and through the Church for the rest of your life. Gone now are the days when you wandered the world, half-heartedly looking for pearls of truth here and there, or maybe in a very different way, you had been stuck through your own bad choices in an impassioned state

of self-defeat. Now, however, you can truly repent and embark upon that narrow highway that leads in and to the kingdom of God.

If you have an unbelieving family, spouse or partner, give a good example and pray that they will respect your decision and even accept, in some sense, your spiritual leadership for their salvation as well. Authentic (Orthodox) Christianity, after all, knows nothing of an isolated individual Christian. Humans are social animals, so our salvation is tied up in the salvation of others and the transformation of creation itself and is in our hands, be it in ever so small a way.

So, a great and royal path of the Lord lies before you. Choose wisely and well!

Conclusion

This presentation has deliberately avoided an examination of exactly *how* you might be received into the Church. That, should you so wish, will come later. This explanation has emphasised how the Holy Spirit may be moving you forward onto a new and exciting spiritual path. This path may still be one of exploration or it may be a path now committed to instruction. Whichever is the case, I pray by grace and your own hard labour that you may find your way into the heart of God, as a new member of His Church, united in and with His people.

Good Journeying!

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