

## **"The Presentation of The Orthodox Gospel to the American Genius"**

### **Prospects, part 1: Ebb Tid**

President George W. Bush is ending his Presidency.

It was 8 years of some objectives that were fulfilled, but also – in his own words – 8 years of many hopes that were disappointed.

It appears that those who are most disappointed are the group that is known as “the Religious Right.” This unfortunate term includes conservative Protestants, most evangelicals, charismatics, and fundamentalists. There are many in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities who would sympathize with much of the Religious Right agenda. Frequently, I count myself one of these (and I hasten to add that I genuinely like W, if not some of his more idealistic advisers).

President George W. Bush was the leader that was earnestly hoped for in this movement. He was their high-water mark. More than Ronald Reagan ever was, George W. Bush not only “talked the talk” of the Religious Right, but he also “walked the walk.” Leigh Schmidt, professor of religion at Princeton University (and reviser of [The Religious History of America](#), mainly written by Edwin Gaustad), called Bush the most powerful ally that the Religious Right has had since Reagan, and an ally that actually shares the “conversionist vernacular of popular evangelicalism” and speaks it fluently.

The candidacy and Presidency of George Bush may turn out to be the [high mark](#) of the particular form of American Protestantism that we call, simply, evangelicalism. Bush was a man produced by the American “camp meeting” tradition. He carried a real sinner’s testimony and conversion. He had been a lackluster, irresponsible and dissolute young man, whose academic, military and business experiences were hardly creditable. A crisis had brought him to a point where he acknowledged his shortcomings, and he called out to the Lord in a religious experience, and was converted. Since then he has given up drink (and other dependencies), and he has talked with Billy Graham, Tony Evans (of Promise Keepers) and many others in the evangelical community.

Reagan’s connection with the evangelicals (and with any Christian community, for that matter) was always tenuous. He identified himself strongly as “pro-life,” but one wondered whether that was due more to his conservative identification. In Reagan there might have been a strange reversal of the customary evangelical immersion into politics: where the evangelical became political because of his religious convictions (i.e., he attended the National Right to Life March in January because of his biblically-founded ethics), Reagan, on the other hand, made the reverse movement. Because of his political objectives (i.e., the construction of a conservative political coalition comprised of eastern financial,

large corporation, and anti-modernist Christian communities), he espoused certain ethical/political positions which were salient in the evangelical agenda.

Moreover, Reagan's "walk" in Christianity was spotty. He attended church rarely. His wife consulted with astrologers and other esoteric practitioners. His family was torn by divorce and internecine conflict. His own wife and son have gone on record, after his death from Alzheimer's, as supporting fetal cell research.

I do not question Reagan's Christian self-identification. But with him, there is a sharp disconnect between the public rhetoric that was always careful to reinforce his affiliation with the Religious Right, and numerous behaviors that violated the historical evangelical ethic.

It seems that George W. Bush was much more to the evangelical liking. Here was a penitent sinner who did not mind at all the language of "being born again." He attended church. He opposed not only abortion, but also stem cell research. He pushed through legislation for faith-based community services.

At the same time, however, he perpetuated and exaggerated the old Religious Right political agenda. In the late 1970s, the Religious Right, under the aegis of people like Jerry Falwell, Bob Jones, Pat Robertson and James Dobson, sponsored on one hand the customary "natural law" agenda of opposition to gay rights, radical feminism, abortion, and other forms of libertinism. This was a reaction to the experiential and overly-privatized (and subjectivistic) "born again" Christianity made popular by Jimmy Carter, and to a simultaneous perception of the secularization of American culture. It was in this period that the Religious Right recognized the anti-abortion work which had been carried on by the Roman Catholics: and this recognition alone accounted for the enormously significant rapprochement between the conservative Protestant movement and the Roman Catholics (a relationship heretofore which had been frigid at best, if not downright antagonistic).

But for some reasons still shrouded in obscurity (though I have my own suspicions, which I will discuss later), joined to this "natural law" reaction were classic Republican emphases, which were not naturally connected to the evangelical mindset: promotion of nuclear weapon strategy and production; promotion of "neo-conservative" use of military to advance national interests; promotion of laissez-faire economics and high-finance/corporate interests; acceptance of domestic intelligence surveillance; and opposition to market regulation and environmental protection. This came to a critical development under Reagan, who fostered a "trickle-down" economic theory which clearly favored the interests of the aristocracy – a class for which that the evangelicals had historically reserved some of its most trenchant criticism. It is really a Reagan legacy that someone like Rupert Murdoch, who has constructed a journalistic empire on soft-porn and [yellow journalism](#), to be called a "conservative" ... even a "fellow-traveler" with the Religious Right. I have to believe that in another, more prurient and more consistently conservative age,

that such a one as Ann Coulter would never have been counted in the conservative ranks: conservatism *then* meant [being civil](#) and [wearing clothes](#).

The evangelical dalliance with Republicanism reached full maturity in the neo-conservative policies of Vice-President Dick Cheney, who – while President Bush typified the evangelical leader of a Christian nation – designed and executed the perfect earthly and millennial vision of the Religious Right: the New Crusade (and call it for what it was) against the earthly menace opposing Christianity ... the invasion of Muslim Iraq, and the gain of carbon wealth from anti-Christian forces.

*(Crusades do not work because they **cannot** work,  
since the Church has no **earthly** enemies,  
and what enemies she has  
cannot be fought against by earthly fire)*

There is an odd and terrifying dynamic that history reveals: time – whatever it is – corrodes falsehood, and only permits that which is true to stand and remain. American history is a pageant of houses which have been raised up upon the sand, and the storms have come and lashed unfounded structures built on bad ideas. And many of these houses have carried Christian addresses.

It appears in this dynamic that at the very moment of triumph, the falsity is revealed in complete emptiness. It is as if the Religious Right was given everything that it wanted: indeed, it did, as for a space of one congressional term, the Republicans and Religious Right were in control of the Executive Branch, both houses of the Legislative Branch, and – to a degree – the Supreme Court.

But wars change everything, and this is especially true of the latest one. Some of the very stated rationales of the war (i.e., weapons of mass destruction; linkage to al-Qaeda) were not confirmed. Some of the expected results of the invasion (i.e., welcoming of the troops; cooperation with occupying power; profit-making oil-production) did not occur. Instead, a profound, wide-ranging insurgency and internecine Islamic civil war developed in the vacuum left by the removal of Saddam Hussein. The war turned from being a rhetoric-producing resource (that actually served to re-elect Bush in 2004) to a domestic political disaster that helped hand the Republicans the worst defeat it has suffered in decades (let alone the real costs of human life and material resources).

And this was by far not the only event which seemed to reckon judgment against the seeming triumph of the Religious Right. The very hallmark of the Republican agenda – the very issue which I believe forced the most profound complicity (and compromise) on the evangelical affiliation with the Republicans – was the pursuit of an international environment favorable to corporate interests.

The recent financial collapse of the usury "bubbles" should be interpreted for what it is. It was the pulling down of false gods. And this latest Wall Street crisis

should have resonance within the heart and soul of American religionists, especially the evangelical community, since Wall Street had become the object of so profound a material faith: funds from churches, seminaries and "para-church" organizations were entrusted to the almost-delphic stewardship of the investors ... clergy pension funds were surrendered to the esoteric charms of fund managers in the certain hopes of golden transmutation.

*You (and evangelicals) say "free economics"  
and shockingly impious declarations  
like "the miracle of compounded interest":  
I say alchemy and the occult.*

President Calvin Coolidge once said that "the business of America is business." A Republican President who typified the over-confidence in laissez-faire "hands-off" economic policy, he also revealed the American middle-class naiveté about corporate interests – the same naiveté that produced the blindness of the Religious Right against its own historic critique of the aristocracy and mercantile interests. Coolidge was President from 1923 until 1929: he applied his admirable sense of fairness and liberty to the context of national economics – a common application (and simplistic distortion) which led to the disaster of the 1929 collapse of Wall Street.

That same Coolidge foolishness was reincarnated in the Reagan coalition, which also garnered middle-class, good-natured support from the overwhelmingly blue-collar, non-mercantile and definitely non-aristocratic evangelical population. They endorsed – with very little requirement for rational persuasion – the solidly pro-corporate "trickle-down" agenda: this was an agenda that was not abstract in the least. There was not even a modicum of concern for farmer, family or micro-business capitalism: there was only the bald claim that exorbitant profiteering, along with derivative usury programs (like hedge funds and other speculative enterprises), would somehow benefit the secondary classes in its wake.

In this period of Reaganomics, the Religious Right was happy in its economic prosperity and in some measured successes. Some pro-life Supreme Court Justices were appointed (although the loss of the [Robert Bork nomination](#) was a particularly hard defeat). Some regulation of the pornography industry was legislated. Some defenses were made of Christian activity in the public sphere, notably some church activity in the public schools, some leeway given to creationism/intelligent design in discussions of cosmogony.

More important (I wonder) than these political victories was perhaps the *material prosperity* that the Reaganomic programme offered not only to the American population, but to the evangelical community in particular. This is when you began to see the extraordinary material development of national televised ministries like [Focus on the Family](#), [the 700 Club](#) ([Pat Robertson](#)), the [PTL Club](#) (before its squalid demise), and the [Swaggart empire](#). This history of televangelism itself is worthy of close study, as it is a particularly American

religious phenomenon, spreading worldwide insofar as American culture obtains. Oddly enough, the televised phase of this phenomenon began in the early 1950s with the pop-theology of the Roman Catholic [Msgr. Fulton Sheen](#), whose positive thinking emphasis (very close to the message of protestant Norman Vincent Peale) continues to find expression in most of the televangelists, but especially in the Lakewood Florida enterprise of [Joel Osteen](#), who captains a hybrid teleministry and a megachurch, along with much work in media (DVD, audio and print sales).

Soon after Fulton Sheen were the crusades of Billy Graham, which started in Los Angeles, and then spread quickly to stadiums across the country. It would be difficult to underestimate the impact of these Crusades on the fundamentalists and evangelicals in particular, and the Protestant community in general. Indeed, Billy Graham has made his influence felt upon the Catholic and Orthodox communities, especially given the friendly reception he has received in Rome and Moscow in the 1970s-1990s. When he was invited to join Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" in 1979, [Graham's response](#) is interesting:

"I'm for morality, but morality goes beyond sex to human freedom and social justice. We as clergy know so very little to speak with authority on the [Panama Canal](#) or superiority of armaments. Evangelists cannot be closely identified with any particular party or person. We have to stand in the middle in order to preach to all people, right and left. I haven't been faithful to my own advice in the past. I will be in the future."

The Religious Right did not heed this advice. Instead, the Graham Crusades firmly established, for the Religious Right, a centralizing religious principle: the evangelical revivalist tradition of a crisis decision "to accept Jesus Christ as one's own personal Saviour."

As unifying as this new "lowest common denominator" as this formula turned out to be, it also produced a rejection of asceticism, a simplification of repentance, an overvaluation of individual experience, and a diminution of doctrinal and ritual into the category of "denominational distinctives."

Megachurches flowered in the years of Reagan, Clinton and the Bushes. Evangelicals had a lot more disposable income, as their religious endorsement of hyper-capitalism was amply rewarded (if only at first, say for 1260 days). The asceticism of simplicity, small-church humility and "invisible" local charity had been eclipsed by the visible success and health/wealth emphases of modern evangelicalism. Land and construction costs were manageable when leveraged. Various lay groups such as the Full Gospel Business Men Association, the Christian Business Men's Alliance, the Lions and Rotary served to provide financial, real estate and project management networking that is so critical to non-hierarchical institutional development.

Megachurches made a lot of sense to protestants. On one hand, they appeared to fulfill a simplistic understanding of the Great Commission: a great big group of people looked successful when compared to the words in the Book of Acts, “and the Lord added to their numbers daily.” What was often overlooked is that most of the people who were added were already affiliated with some Christian community. The construction of a megachurch often had the same damaging effect on local smaller congregations that the erection of a super WalMart store had on mom-and-pop shops nearby.

Moreover, what was also overlooked was the fact that the particular ministries that required locality and intimacy – ministries such as indoctrination, disciplined fellowship and apostolic catachesis – were the *very ministries* that were eclipsed, if not disposed of altogether. The rubric of anonymity was actually embraced as a virtue, even a commodity, in the megachurch.

And thus megachurches accepted their role as “escape zones” for people who were malcontents and disaffected with their particular communities. They provided an immediate “opiate” to the *demands* of authentic fellowship and to the *commands* of Christian dogma – demands and commands that often aroused feelings of shame, which was the only way that many now understand the experience of “contrition,” which *should* naturally lead to repentance ... but in American religion, *usually does not*.

In the atriums and program brochures of the megachurches, one can find the natural extension of American evangelicalism from its revivalistic roots to its contemporary quest for application in the modern individual life. The Gospel has been re-defined as a “crisis experience” of belief, and then a psychosocial development along the lines of various “felt needs” (this term is significantly distinguished from “real needs,” as it was once explained that people are motivated more from “felt” needs as opposed to real ones ... this was the same source that said that there was a greater need in the American church for pastors who were administrators than pastors who were theologians or Bible scholars). One found in the megachurches an uncertain “anti-dogmatism” that persists to this day. Some ill-defined, ambiguous and simplistic beliefs (assumed to be derived from a self-evident reading of the New Testament, without any mediation by a historic church), were held to be necessary: everything else was negotiable, and indeed was defined as secondary, drawn from a primitive sectarian past that must be surmounted. There were strong affirmations of Biblical authority (in the sharply reduced Reformation understanding of the term), but there were also many explicit endorsements of not only political issues, but political candidates, parties and platforms.

The megachurch is really the icon of the height and extension of the American religion, which started in revival, and developed through phases of camp meetings, crusades, and then tele-media and large corporate structures. There is a simple reason why megachurches often look corporate in their architecture: they have simply become on the exterior what structure they have adopted on the

interior. Megachurches are built on the prevailing “consumeristic” religion of America, whether it goes under a Christian name, New Age, Jewish or Muslim:

*This style thrived in the world of high-rise apartments, long weekends, and airport newsstands; it was made up of clienteles and not congregations, of consumers more than converts, of do-it-yourself experimenters more than people who felt called to be judged by a living God. The journey of the new American individualists is likely to be characterized by ever more paths, by ever more bewildering choices between options* (Martin Marty, [Pilgrims in Their Own Land](#), p. 475).

We will look, later on, at the profound hypothesis of Harold Bloom – literature critic and professor at Yale, who suggests – with a great deal of reason – that the American religion has always been and is manifesting itself outright as a *gnostic ethos*.

We have seen this American Gnosticism induce a lot of privatized, subjectivist emphasis in the protestant movement, even in the conservative evangelical movement. We see it especially in the charismatic/Pentecostal yearning for ecstasy and for esoteric experiences and knowledge. More generally, we see it in the “radical individualization” of religion.

There are two developments which reveal this individualization. One is obviously the megachurch movement. The other is the “emergent” movement, which is a lot more honest and intellectual about its philosophical underpinnings (vs. the megachurch business model, which is rarely divulged and is often masked by religious-sounding “mission statements”).

The emergent movement, too, is a particularly American phenomenon. The [Emergent Church](#) emphasizes Christianity as a journey, and as an experience, more than a destination. It frequently confuses humility with uncertainty: very often, you will hear emergents tolerating or being open to doubt and skepticism about the Faith. They oppose dogmatism, and are generally uncomfortable talking about dogma, or “normative belief” or “faith-propositions” at all, since that seems to be too limiting, too patriarchal and too “western/colonial” and not multicultural enough. This is really a self-consciously “post-modern” movement that chooses an individualized “mysticism” over traditional dogma: this movement is very much built on a smorgasboard approach to Christian spirituality. In this “mood,” you will often hear emergents say, “Give me Jesus, not doctrine.” They will insist on the priority of “orthopraxis” over “orthodoxy,” especially in terms of doctrine (and we have to be cautious, because that same notion is gaining currency in our own community – the easiest response to this fallacy is that while one certainly sees deficiencies in orthopraxis, one *never* sees superfluity in orthodox doctrine; and it is certain that deficiencies in orthopraxy are produced by more profound deficiencies in doctrine).

While God is addressed as the “Wholly Other” in emergent speech, there is almost a complete lack of reference to God’s Holiness as wrath against sin and unrepentance. Moreover, there is almost a palpable avoidance of any reference to eschatology and the “Last Day.” Frequently, emergents and other postmodern evangelicals will diminish the Church’s traditional moral teachings (e.g., against homosexual behavior) with a rationalization like “Jesus never said anything about gays.” This rhetoric has now labeled itself as a movement: “[Red-Letter Christians](#).”

You might be impressed by the frequent references to eastern Orthodoxy: but this is only because postmodern evangelicals in general see Orthodoxy as an attractive “mystical” alternative to the over-familiar and worn-out categories of their fundamentalist upbringings. They recognize that “more” is needed in their doctrine, but they cannot bring themselves to the humility and full repentance of catechism and obedience (this probably explains the sad reality of certain numbers of evangelical converts to Orthodoxy failing after a few years, and either returning to their upbringing or lapsing into irreligiosity).

The Emergent Church is attractive in that it is a more reasonable correction of the Religious Right political program. They reject some of the militarist and hyper-capitalist agenda of the Republicans, and they claim to reject the Democrats (I rather doubt that there is much of the Democrat agenda that they reject, as they too quickly “hedge” on issues like homosexuality, stem-cell research, and even abortion). It appears that the Emergents will turn out to be simply a subset within the Evangelicals who are steadily moving toward a mainline position, which has generally rejected the dogma of the traditional Church.

In any case, the political movement of the Religious Right has been hammered, and this last election may turn out to be its death knell. The evangelical community – which used to be completely represented by the Religious Right – is now a collection of associations, ill-defined congregations, movements and organizations, and a minimum of normative beliefs still centered around the crisis-centered revivalist identity.

The Religious Right, it could be argued, got everything they wanted politically in the years of George W. Bush. No President has ever before been so friendly to their aims *as evangelicals*. No one in the White House had ever talked the talk the way he did. Certainly, no one had ever walked the walk.

Now, they are left out in the record-setting cold, in political Siberia. Their only political hope lies now in arranging some coalition with Democrats (like Obama) who are trying to prevent a return to the old culture war delineations. What Republicans remain are busy denouncing social conservatives and blaming their woes on the Religious Right. They are working fast to construct an “inclusive” Republican party that is more amenable to pro-choice and pro-gay constituencies. Even Bush, in his final press conference on 12 January 2009, said that the Republicans needed to be more inclusive. After all, both his father and



Colin Powell said that the Republican Party has a "big tent." When this cliché is uttered, it is a code word for another rejection of Natural Law.

With the permeation of the megachurch into American culture, and the prevalence of "smorgasboard spiritual experimentation," it could be argued that the evangelicals possessed, for a while, everything they wanted. In the years from Carter to George W. Bush, the evangelicals were at the very top of American society, both politically and culturally.

In 1978 (two years after the "born again" cover stories in Time and Newsweek, brought on by Jimmy Carter), Richard Quebedeaux enthusiastically wrote these words about evangelicals at the top of the world:

"Now, of course, evangelicalism, in its Protestant, Catholic, and charismatic forms, is really the mainline brand of American Christianity" (cited in Marty, p. 470).

This is probably still the case, if you want to use rather unfortunate terms like "brand."

But it is a weak, *diluted* Protestantism. It is nothing like the strong flavors of the Reformation, where the propositions of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli (as heretical as they were) were clearly pronounced in honest (if combative) rhetoric. Now, the real goals have moved away from truth and faithfulness, and have become more "business-like": the objectives are institutional development, recruitment, numeric gain. Programs are evaluated in terms of audience endorsement: real evaluation forms are sometimes handed out after "worship services."

Evangelicals continue to succeed nowadays because it is much easier to call oneself "evangelical." There are far few doctrines that must be espoused, and far few behaviors that must be practiced. Moreover, "affiliation standards" or "membership criteria" have been confused to the point where it is possible to change affiliation several times over the course of one year ... indeed, it is possible for one person to be a member of more than one institution, and not even know it ... and I wonder how many Orthodox individuals are counted as members of large evangelical churches because they attend those churches most of the year except for Christmas and Pascha.

So it is *easier* to be Evangelical, to be a member of the American religion, but it is probably less *meaningful*. It is certainly less important on the political stage.

Why spend time studying evangelicalism? Because evangelicalism has been the American religion, as we will carefully show throughout the duration of this course.

In American evangelicalism, you have the full development of democratized Protestantism, not only extant within the Protestant community, but also

showing up significantly in the Roman community and also in some of the latest controversies of the Orthodox movement.

Evangelicalism is American religion. The study of the history of Evangelicalism, which we probably ought to call American Protestantism, is the best way to understand the *genius* of this country or a nation.

What is critical now, however, is that this American religion may be changing, along with American society. We are going to study carefully the newest sociological “pictures” of society and religion, especially the [Pew Forum U. S. Religious Landscape Survey](#).

We are going to take a close look at recent American religious history, so that we can understand what happened to the mainline Protestant movement after 1950. We will look further back at the Revivalist movement in America, and how it developed and changed with the rise of the Sunday School, the Graham Crusades, and tele-evangelism on the radio, TV and now the Internet.

Then, we will look at where American religion and society are heading. Like it or not, we live in a world that is very different from the culture that prevailed after WWII. More people are in more debt, but more people live more comfortably. America may be losing her primary status to China and India. The economy may force a simpler lifestyle and a lowering of material expectations. The old Protestant mainline churches may be joined by postmodern evangelicals in their reaction to natural law. The fundamentalists are becoming less and less understandable, and more and more alienated in the modern world.

**Religion is the teaching of the “genius” of a country to pray.** That, I know, is the oddest formulation you have heard today, but we will take the rest of this course to try and figure it out. But suffice it to say that I think [Harold Bloom](#) is right: American religion has always been at least latently gnostic – it is only becoming more *explicit*. It is gnostic, because the American genius is gnostic. It cries out for ecstasy and esoteric power. It wants freedom from other selves, being allergic to koinonia, and it seeks (foolishly) a bareheaded solitude in the face of the demiurgic abyss.

*Apostolic dogma  
is the only anodyne  
for gnostic neurosis*

I think, after our careful study, that we will find that American Protestantism is receding. It is either fading into mainline renunciation of eschatology and dogma (e.g., “the journey is better than the destination”), or a fundamentalist minimalization of doctrine and a gross simplification of the end-times (which itself is a renunciation of history, and the Incarnation).

It has been disappointed by the Wall Street collapse of an economic structure it had worked so hard (ever since Calvin's day) to justify and cooperate with. It has been disappointed by the failure of the Iraqi campaign to produce a missionary success for the Gospel of American democracy.

I suggest that these are more than disappointments. These are, like the wildfire growth of Islam, *Divine judgments*.

Judgment – however it occurs – is the fire that destroys falsehood, the storm that pulls down houses built on sand. Nothing can stand for long unless it is built on true, apostolic foundations.

At the end, there is complete apostasy, or there is Orthodoxy. American Protestantism is heading in *both* directions.

## **2) Bad News before the Good**

Your Eminence, Reverend Fathers, Clergy and Faithful: Glory to Jesus Christ!

Thank you for your kind invitation. I am honored for this privilege of speaking to you today on Orthodox evangelism and the modern American society.

Some of you know that I grew up in the revivalist part of Protestantism. We were rightly named, as my father's church put on two revivals every year, consisting of nightly evening services that lasted for one to two weeks.

We had a strange expression that involved those services. It was "the saw dust trail." It stood for the invitation or the "altar call" that was issued by the evangelist at the end of the service, in which sinners were called to come forward to the front to pray and take Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour.

We called that walk up the aisle the sawdust trail because in the old days, revivals were held outside under a tent. Sawdust was put down on the ground to keep it from getting too muddy. Hence, "sawdust trail" became a symbol of "finding religion," hearing the Gospel and getting saved.

That was a long time ago, and we Orthodox were very far away – at least most of us were. That expression, "sawdust trail" seems so odd for us who are used to incense and iconostases.

Today, I'd like to think with you for a while on what it means to bring the Gospel to America as the Orthodox Church. We are going to start out reflecting on the meaning of the Good News in the context of the particular Bad News that America knows all about.

Then we will have a strange talk on the distinctiveness of the American religious consciousness. I like to call this the "American Genius," and I believe that we must know more about this genius in order to evangelize the people it represents.

And finally, we will wrap up our talks on just what it means to present the Orthodox Gospel to that American Genius.

To start off, I'd like to ask this question:

Has Orthodoxy arrived in America? And has America arrived in Orthodoxy?

We can say yes to both questions, in a way. There are many Orthodox Christians in this country, and there are many more parishes now than there used to be. There are seminaries, magazines, internet communities, organizations and even controversies that serve (at least) to make us more self-conscious. Admittedly, there are not enough monasteries, but now, at least, we have a nice translation of the Scriptural Canon.

In another way, no, for it has not yet arrived completely. Orthodoxy disembarked on these American shores in a piecemeal fashion. It was not like the deliberate mission of Sts. Cyril and Methodios to a single culture. The coming of the Orthodox Gospel to this land has been more a complex series of introductions to various settings and groups of people. In Alaska, the mission was deliberate and apostolic. On the east coast, however, waves of immigrants arrived, feeling the necessity of the Church keenly, and frequently establishing and building their own missions without much support or guidance.

The arrival of Orthodoxy in America is an ongoing process of introduction that is far from over. Sts. Cyril and Methodios, as did all the Apostles, established the fullness of the Christian faith at the very heart of their destination. For St. Paul, this obviously meant Athens and Rome. For the American Orthodox Christian, however, this destination remains unknown. We probably know more about America than we did a century ago. But we do not know nearly enough, not yet.

“America” is a term that defies capture. It is an elusive word, like a greased pig. Fall upon it, squeeze it, and it shoots through your arms.

So just what, for our purposes, is “America”?

Is "America" the new New Rome? For many reasons, America is the center of the world's agora. America is the place of worldwide commerce and the global “commercial culture” – this truly is the real name and character of the culture in which we now live. Whatever the term “globalization” means, the meaning of that term must be anchored in this nation, as we are being blamed not only for Hollywood all over the world: now we are blamed also for the excesses of Wall Street. The America of Madison Avenue, Hollywood, Silicon Valley and the chattering news is, whether we like it or not, the "America" the world thinks it knows: "first world" nations in Europe and Asia may huff and puff about this juvenile, sophomoric culture, but despite its complaints, the world has become this American brand of secular commercialism whether it likes it or not: nobody will stop buying at WalMart or eating at the Golden Arches.

And even in this economic Ice Age, I should add that the latest profit figures from the fast food companies are looking very good indeed.

Unfortunately, that base culture is the very thing taken as “America” even by Orthodox Christians – who, of all people, should know better. This misapprehension or "debasement" of America produces a number of evangelistic confusions, or worse, "missionary shipwrecks." On hand there are misbegotten entrepreneurial forms of evangelicalism that litter our highway with unfortunate billboards like "Got God?" instead of "Got Milk?" Or -- a classic from the 1970's -- "Godweiser," instead of the malt product from St. Louis. And my personal favorite that once stood over the Parkway into Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle: "Tired of the Old Church? Try Jesus Instead."

But we are accustomed to these deployments from the evangelical school of church growth advertising.

The mistake that is more likely for us is a "substitutionary mission ethic," where not only the old country faith is proclaimed, but also old country devices like language, ethnic custom and political agenda are packaged confusedly with doctrine. The result is that the usual American who is, in reality, unchurched (despite whatever protestant exposure he has accumulated) will assume that the Trinity must be some Eastern European or Mediterranean invention, instead of the crucial foundation of human life that it is.

The America that is described by commerce and politics can never become our missionary destination, and cannot be the aim of the Gospel. In other words, the American genius is not to be found in Washington DC or in New York ... certainly not on Wall Street, Madison Avenue or in Hollywood. This sort of America is easy to be criticized, and easy to be hated. But it is an America that exists only on glossy pages, cardboard and on TV screens. It is a cliché, a production of smoke and mirrors.

It seems to me that this deceptive facade of America has been responsible for the unsettling and the overthrow of many evangelistic plans. One may look to the sorry state of the Dobson enterprise, which started out as a decent resource for childrearing, but stands now as one of the jostling mouthpieces of the remnants of the Moral Majority on the political scene. One may also look at the constant rise and fall of televangelists like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Benny Hinn, and Robert Tilton.

They were only doing what their consultants told them to do in the Church Growth Seminars: "it doesn't matter so much what you preach -- what matters is how you preach it and the experience you provide."

More importantly, they were only doing what their own *religion* demanded: the Gospel, for them, is only a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their own personal, individualized Lord and Saviour. This is the famous old Baptist doctrine of "soul competency," in which the individual -- not the Church, not the family or parish or fellowship -- walks with alone with Jesus in the forty days after the Resurrection. He never ascends and reigns in the Millennium. He stays, and the individual has God all alone to himself.

Some of you remember the old revival song, "I come to the valley *alone* while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear falling on *my* ear, the Son of God discloses: And He walks with *me* and He talks with *me*, and He tells *me* I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there *none other* has ever known."

The goal, then, for American revivalists, from the very likeable Billy Graham down to the less reputable "name it, claim it, lay your head on the TV screen so I can lay my televised hand on you" televangelists (some of whom are in trouble for

having golden commodes) -- the goal for American revivalists is to get Americans to sing this song: which is a song of personal salvation ... alone-ness with Christ, a release from this worldly vale of sorrows in an envelope of individualized ecstasy ... a song which is a thirst for experience at the expense of Trinitarian meaning and Incarnational dogma ... a hunger for affirmation at the cost of repentance, sacrament and communion ... a demand for up-to-date-ness, novelty, being brand-new at the complete dismissal of Tradition.

Let us try to think differently of the place we want to go. Let us lay aside, at the nonce, the earthly cares of administrative unity, or autocephaly, or autonomy, or the American Patriarchate. Let us think of these shores, and what and who lie between.

It is possible to think of America without WalMart or CNN, without assaulting the land or its people with plastic templates, corporate charts and partisan colored maps.

Indulge me, then, with a little sentimental journey:

I love America, but I do not put my trust in mortal princes, or parties, or new management techniques, or shiny business designs. I am fervently patriotic because my country shines through my father's arms. I hear him singing about the little brown church in the vale from his pulpit at revival meetings, cutting grass in June and eating hot dogs in July at minor league baseball parks. I disagree over and over with politicians and I am petulantly bored with every political party (both parties signal the first decline of patriotism into boorishness, and soon become a systematic rejection of classic and civic education). But I imbibe American history and her literature, and love the people and the land. I grow sentimental when I sing "America the Beautiful," even though my voice cannot range the rigor of the "Star-Spangled Banner." I read, like Chesterton did, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* whose pages are chock-full of Americans busy at planting, plowing, piloting barges and driving teams, cooking on hot stoves and picking corn. I read the mystic sonorities of natural law, family and the ages in the images of Faulkner's *Big Woods*. I join the throngs at football and baseball games and note, in its sublimity, the myriad display of a single, fractured human nature, whose persons are known to and called each one by the Word to participation in Triune Grace.

I mention this personal excursus because I have found these ways helpful in my search for America, and the place where Orthodoxy must go. The Orthodox Church is "here" without having yet "arrived."

The American language that Orthodoxy *does* speak already is really the gross tongue of "television American." It does not yet know the grammar of the back yard, the church parking lot, or the town or union hall. We Orthodox, in our Greek-ness and Russian-ness or whatever-ness, are too practiced at looking upon the *hoi polloi* as just so many bumpkins. We either follow the mainline tradition

of trampling down the grass roots and taking up the ghastly modernistic tongue of academic crusade against blue-collar, hill-billy piety. Or, if we're still Christian, we adopt a Greek or Russian accent, and preach Orthodoxy as if it were a new alternative (and very chic) ethnicity, and present it in a fashion that is most calculated to throw down the maximum number of obstacles and scandals in front of your usual truckdriver who listens to Willie Nelson, your retail associate who walks down the Mall texting on her iPhone, your burger-flipper who spends his days at Burger King and his nights on meth or ecstasy or whatever's in his neighbor's medicine cabinet, or your Dilbert-reading telemarketer, trapped for life in a cubicle.

When these people respond to the call, "In the fear of God, with faith and with love come forward," they need to fear only *God*, and not how scary, or offensive, or scandalous, or incomprehensible, we are.

The Gospel means "good news" ... the main reason why America has not heard the Orthodox Gospel of repentance and *theosis*, of Trinity and Incarnation, is not because the Gospel is in any way deficient, nor is it because we Orthodox do not have the Gospel, because we do ... but only because we have not yet come to America ... we are here, but in many ways, we are still immigrants from the Old World to the New ... we have not yet arrived at the center of America

I think we need to "get there." And to make that journey, we need to comprehend the American "need" for the Gospel. If we were to experience a "Macedonian vision" like that of St. Paul's, what would an American say beyond "Please help us"? Just why is the Good News so good for an American? I think historically we have answered that question in particular for the Roman and the Greek, for the European and, perhaps, to other ethnic groups in other lands. But oddly enough, it may turn out that this question was never really answered for the American.

Why is the Good News so good for an American? The American himself certainly doesn't know the answer to this question. And he is demonstrating that ignorance by his departure from the Protestant and Roman Churches in droves. According to [the US Religious Landscape Survey of 2008](#), the fastest growing religious group today, by far, is not the Pentecostals, the Baptists, the Moslems or the Mormons. It is a group that counted for less than 5% back in 1972. Now it counts for 16% of all adult Americans (as compared to 1.7% for Mormons, 0.6% for Muslims, and, for our particular interest, 0.6% for Orthodox). This group, growing faster by leaps and bounds than any other religious group, is called "unaffiliated." They are neither for Church or God or against Church or God. They simply don't care: and in my mind, that is worse than honest atheism. At least an atheist respects belief enough to reject it: the unaffiliated don't even believe in *belief*.

In the next presentation, we will look more closely at this Unaffiliated group, and their particular message for Christianity. So stay tuned.



Why is the Good News so good for an American? We Orthodox do not know, yet. Maybe it would be helpful to look at the bad news first. What is it about the American Bad News that makes the Orthodox Good News so good?

There is no doubt that “bad news” can be found in spades, all over the compass and in various lines of analyses.

Let’s take a quick tour of the morning news (probably not in print form, since we are told that the city newspaper is fast on its way toward becoming a thing of the past).

The *demographic* forecast is pretty dire. Mosques are popping up in well-known places, and population forecasts look like a replay of the eighth century. But Mormons are even more numerous, and are just as expansive in demographics, and are even better placed in the military and the intelligence apparatus of the country. Besides, Christians are never called to fight religious foes for the sake of religion. There is only one thing to do about scary Assyrians, Muslims, Mormons or secularists, and that is to repent and pursue deification. The prophets would add something, doubtless, about justice: taking care of the poor, suggested Amos, is the best way of tackling the Assyrians.

The *economic* picture looks bleak enough, and we don’t need to dwell on it. You’re here on retreat, after all, and so we don’t need to attempt a dubious impression of CNBC or Jim Cramer. Besides, recessions and depressions do not sufficiently explain the current “Bad News for Modern Man,” or for America.

The *geopolitical* outlook is another negative forecast. It is now a commonplace to worry about old enemies like Russia again. Venezuela and Hugo Chavez are the new Nicaragua and Cuba. Every day, pundits mutter darkly about India and China growing in power, and taking world preeminence away from America.

But is that the “bad news” that the Gospel overturns? If we thought so, then we would be making the same mistake made by the Zealots of old Palestine – they and many others assumed that the Messiah’s Gospel should have been all about a liberation movement, at least a “consciousness-raising” political struggle. The Preaching of Christ during Holy Week made it very clear that the Gospel went beyond the material goals of both capitalists and Marxists, of both the politically advantaged and the economically depressed.

How about the always depressing topic of *moral decline*? This subject is always good for a blog post or a cranky sermon. It was everything I could do to resist ranting about the lady who gave birth to octoplets, after having 6 children already, all under the age of seven. Even now, in this discussion of contemporary American Orthodoxy, it is a near-overwhelming temptation to launch out on a jeremiad on the decline of morals: the constant rejection of natural law by society ... the constant decay of marital stability ... the rise of sexual activity outside of the bounds of heterosexual marriage – especially in the adolescent population ...

the material greed of corporate captains and consumers alike that has landed this nation in its present economic miasma, filled with corporate dinosaurs flailing about in the LaBrae tarpits of bailouts and bankruptcies.

But is that that Bad News? We generally stop here at this level of analysis and say “yes.” But today, I say “no.”

Frankly, we’d be hard pressed to tell people celebrating the breakdown of natural law that they are worse off. Anyone who has ever worked with chemical dependency and sexually active youth knows that it’s no use telling a sinner that sin is miserable. No, it is not: the aftermath of sin certainly is – the wages of sin is death, after all. But in the mean time, there is fun and games, “eat drink and be merry” and all that.

In order to appreciate the particularities of proclaiming the Orthodox Gospel to Americans, who are busy “marrying and giving in marriage in the mean time, as in the days of Noah,” we must explore the depths of the Bad News that Americans understand so well ... especially late at late at 3 am, in the dark when the house is quiet but the mind is loud with the clamor of anxiety, complaints, and dread about the end of days. At this pre-dawn moment when the night is darkest and most heart attacks occur, every American knows that we stand at a watershed and a turning point, when one age is evaporating into history and nostalgia, and another age is taking its place.

As Philip Rieff notes in his great work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, we have already made a departure from the Judeo-Christian culture of Christendom, and we have entered a culture that is purely therapeutic. Rieff sees Sigmund Freud as the architect of this new order, in which man no longer strives for “the good, sane life,” but at “better living” – an objective that is much less than the once-noble aims of the West, much more debased than the anthropology of Orthodox dogma.

“Psychological Man” has now replaced “Philosophical Man”: the ideals of culture no longer have the power to impress their design into the character of a modern life. It used to be that culture transmitted the truths of at least Natural Law into the hearts of its children: this is no longer the case. Virtue has been replaced by “value.” And whatever is of value is whatever contributes to the well-being of the individual. Real “faith commitments” – i.e., the kind that are summed up by “taking up one’s Cross in self-denial” – are impossible for “psychological man.” Religion is good only insofar as it is valuable, as in: will it help me feel better? ... will religion make me more comfortable? ... what’s in it for me?

In his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch extended Rieff’s grim pronouncement: the narcissistic personality was not that of an inflated egoist (like Trump or Napoleon) whose self-love had reached astronomical proportions, but the narcissist is really that of the insecure soul who lacks the very requisites of selfhood. In this sort of deep, psychic insecurity, there is no possibility for real fulfillment or happiness. As Rieff wrote of this chilling prospect, the modern

individual in the therapeutic culture “finds himself buried incredibly deep in a night he never consciously desired” (Rieff, *Triumph*, xxx).

In other words, the American – in his genius, in the national consciousness – already knows the bad news of sin, and he already knows the dread of the Last Day and the Hades that is leading up to it.

It is not enough to list sins and sinfulness, especially as there is no end to this particular professional and clerical hobby. I certainly can keep myself awake, with my attention on caffeinated edge, with Internet reports of Chlamydia and STDs increasing geometrically in retirement villages like Sun City in Phoenix. Or with reports on pornography consumption in private homes, coast to coast, with no shame from having to go to red-light districts downtown: now, all you have to do is get up late at night when everyone’s asleep and download the latest from the cyber-den of the Web. Or with reports of a majority of children in America, nowadays, who are growing up in confused, blended homes, with sets of parents, step-parents, caretaking grandparents and guardian ad litem.

It is not enough to be sad and despairing at the trouble around us. Our country, the nation that calls us in the Macedonian vision, has looked to religion for comfort and advantage, and that religion – whatever it was – has failed them. And her citizens find themselves “buried incredibly deep in a night they never consciously desired.”

In my old secular day job, before I was ordained, I served as a counselor in an adolescent psychiatry ward. I got my fill of dangerous, conduct disorder delinquents who beat up other kids, who tortured animals, raped and abused other children and who set fire to sheds and trailer homes.

I played an awful game those days. It was “Find the Deadbeat Dad.” The awful part of this game was that we frequently found him, and it was never very hard. We found him – or Social Services found him – sitting sprawled and plastered on a beatup Lazy Boy, beer-stained T-shirt, watching ESPN on his widescreen TV, his trailer ceiling leaking rain from the firehoses the night before.

The only difference money and education made was the size of the Lazy Boy and the condition of the room. The loss of discipline, the eclipse of Tradition, the betrayal of spouse and the abandonment of children, the long drawn out abortion of American childhood, was always, always the same.

But it is not enough to shake one’s head at a drunkard in a trailer park: what must needs be is an Orthodox parish that can teach the *son* of that drunkard, an unwed boy with children of his own how to grow up, finally, and become an Orthodox man. For it will soon be that the only way a boy can become an American man is through Orthodoxy: so it will be for a girl to become a lady, a house to become a home, a social security number to become a Christian citizen, a pensioner to become an American Saint.

And God knows we need more of these.

It is this loyalty, this old-fashioned love of people and the land, and this devotion to the native Natural Law written in America's past and her majestic landscape that stand, as the man from Macedonia, as the modern call to the Orthodox Church: "Come and help us!" It is this love of the American people and the American land that the Orthodox Church must travail toward before the Church can lead American sinners to Jesus.

### 3) The American Genius – Part 3

When Orthodoxy arrived here, what it tried to do, in a sort of naïve optimism or friendliness, was to look for commonalities and similarities with the native American religion, its peculiar Protestantism. In doing so, Orthodox missionary-immigrants discovered certain beliefs that appeared to be articles of the Nicene Creed, and certain cultural manifestations (e.g., crosses in the churches) that appeared to sound familiar from Holy Tradition

But in the fervent search for commonalities, the Orthodox mission has overlooked the significance of difference ... it is the separation from Holy Tradition that provides for us the most significant information about what is peculiar to America, her genius, and where we ought to travel to arrive at her center ... in other words, where we, in completing the work of Cyril and Methodios, need to go to reach the heart of the indigenous people, the "national consciousness" America

When we think about Sts Cyril and Methodius established pattern of mission. They set the groundwork for probably the greatest conversion of all time.

Their program is well known: the translation of Church language into the vernacular, the leading of the native people to theosis and development of indigenous leadership.

But we should notice that this glorious example of the Apostles to the Slavs is itself an application – or unfolding – of Our Lord’s instruction to the Seventy Apostles in Luke 10:

*When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house."*

The goal of the Orthodox Gospel Mission, wherever we go, is to proclaim, “Peace to the House” ... to go to where the people live, and to bring the Peace that passes understanding – the gracious atmosphere of the Holy Trinity – to the people in their language and in their land ... the establishment of Orthodoxy in the heart of the city, at the very hearthstone of the country.

Now I know this sounds like familiar stuff of evangelism: but we need to go beyond an immediate discussion of techniques, like the setting up of billboards, advertising and distribution of tracts, the putting up of tract racks, the scheduling of Celebrity events and even Christian rock concerts.

Without demeaning (for now) any of these techniques, I simply ask that we hold off from programming and planning, and spend some moments instead in

thinking of mission, the Gospel, and what it means to bring Orthodoxy to America.

We need to think more deeply about what we mean by the ambiguous term, “evangelism” ... the aim of this conference today -- “the presentation of the Orthodox Gospel to the American genius” -- is about the most cogent, helpful “framing” of evangelism I’ve encountered

The presentation of the Orthodox Gospel to the American genius is a phrase that penetrates deeply into a question with two distinct parts: first, the object of our mission, the people and place, the house that needs peace ... and second, the nature of that “Peace” itself, the Gospel, the Orthodoxy that transcends all its national, ethnic appearances.

Specifically, we will take a look at the character of the American culture – its ethos – and how we can proclaim the Orthodox Gospel to that culture and in that language ... the American language is more than words ... it is a way of thinking, an album of memories, and book of stories, and a “yellow brick road” of historic desires.

The best indicator of the American genius is her actual and popular religion. To do this, we will take an interesting turn toward a rather obscure academic discipline – and that is the school of “religious criticism.”

The best religious critic is a controversial literary critic by the name of Harold Bloom. He is not Christian by a long shot. He identifies himself as a “non-practicing Jewish gnostic.”

Oddly enough, his Gnosticism actually serves us well here, as it is more sensitive to the enormous gnostic currents in American religion. These currents are consistently missed by most religious historians, especially on the Protestant side of religious history.

This religious criticism of American religion that Bloom offers reveals that it is, especially in contrast to its European antecedents, profoundly *gnostic*.

This explains a conundrum that has bedeviled American religious historians. We have always wondered why European Protestantism and even Catholicism have changed once it reached these shores.

One common reason is the dominance of post-enlightenment culture. You hear this theory in Franky Schaefer’s description of the New England worship service as something based upon the town hall meeting.

Another common theory blames the legacy of Puritanism, with all its anti-Church and pro-congregational sentiment.

Consequently, we in Orthodoxy have sought to answer these legacies with history and doctrinal lessons: all of which show that Orthodoxy is an unbroken witness to apostolic succession, worship and dogma.

Time will tell whether that rational appeal will succeed: but it does risk the possibility of becoming just another of America's seemingly-endless panoply of denominations who all say this very same thing.

I have often wondered whether this was the right approach for us in America. Don't get me wrong: these things about historic and doctrinal continuity need to be said, simply because it is true ... but will it *work*? Is this argument, for our time and place in America, rhetorically effective?

I don't think so ... one reason for this is because Americans do not care much about doctrine ... they care little about the truth about God, and certainly less about Natural Law (or God's expectations/wisdom found in Creation and articulated through scripture/tradition), and least about Christianity and the Church.

The common dismissal here is well-known: "doctrine" and "dogma" have now become cuss words in American linguistics ... they are accused of producing "intolerance" and an evil condition called "closed-mindedness," which is the only pathology in secular psychiatry that is allowed to have a moral etiology.

The other reason is that Americans don't really care much about history ... this present culture, no matter what we call it, is "present-oriented," even "present-imprisoned" ... we have been told this before by the likes of Marshall McLuhan. This, by the way, is the real reason why graveyards are being given the miss, and cremations have become such an enthusiastic industry: it erases the past. Graveyards are spooky with memory. Urns just don't have that ambiance, that hard reality of tragedy, the unavoidable signification of the psychic need for salvation.

As such, America's entire culture has turned toward a therapeutic yearning for comfortable-ness, as we've already heard from Philip Rieff. The problem with this therapeutic culture, he notes, is that it hides a central deception: "the therapeutic age, for all its bluster about human potential and personal fulfillment, is inherently un-therapeutic and even, in some respects, antihuman" (*Triumph*, xi).

The main reason why America is resistant to doctrine and history – and is particularly resistant to Orthodoxy – is because her "genius," or her "national consciousness," is profoundly gnostic. This "real religion" is sometimes at odds with the stated or claimed religion, and so it is understood by an examination of behavior and values – especially in light of the fact that our culture is no longer "philosophical," but "therapeutic." This examination has been done admirably well by Harold Bloom, in his rather neglected book, *The American Religion*.

American Gnosticism is summed up nicely by Bloom in this passage:

*What I call the American Religion ... seems to me to have three fundamental principles. The first is that what is best and oldest in us goes back well before Creation, and so is no part of the Creation. The second is that what makes us free is knowledge, a history of facts and events, rather than a belief founded upon mere assent. The third is that this freedom has a solitary element in it, an element imbued by the loneliness of belated American time, and the American experience of the abyss of space. What holds these principles together is the American persuasion, however muted or obscured, that we are mortal gods, destined to find ourselves again in worlds as yet undiscovered. (Bloom, *The American Religion*, p99)*

In the first point, which is the most startling, there is the ancient Gnostic belief that the soul is uncreated and is as old as God. This can easily be seen in Mormonism. But for the Evangelicals, the picture is more complicated. As a group, they hold to most of the articles of the Nicene Creed – in fact, all of them if you permit their redefinition of terms like “baptism,” “Apostolic,” and “Church.”

But there is that nagging persistence in Evangelicalism for personalized religion. The Megachurch movement has been successful because it treats the church-goer like a customer, who gets to choose from a smorgasbord lineup of various experiences a whole cafeteria tray that will satisfy his individual tastes and needs. It turns out that the biggest need, and the most successful commodity, of the Evangelical mega-church is anonymity, unaccountability, and evasion of responsibility.

Think of it: you could go to 20,000-attende church, and no one will know that you're on the outs with your wife and that last week you got picked up for DUI. Think of it: you could go to church and believe that Jesus and Buddha and Mohammad were three great guys with good ideas, and you might as well vote for all three just to cover the bases: you're not accountable for your beliefs and no one will know.

Think of it: you could attend as often as you want – or more likely, as seldom as you want – and the church budget won't take a hit as it would in all the Orthodox parishes I know. There are too many in a megachurch for you to feel responsible for your time, your money and your faithfulness.

There is also, in Evangelicalism, a thirst for experience that eclipses any importance of doctrine or truth. What matters, the Evangelical will tell you, is *heart knowledge* as opposed to head knowledge. What matters is a conversion experience, even an ecstatic experience that is well known to Gnostics and neo-platonists of all ages – the individual, solitary psychic ascension from the created world into an individualized confrontation with the Infinite.



“Take Jesus as your personal Saviour” is the common denominator that links all Evangelicals and Charismatics, many Catholics and even Mormons together. I think Harold Bloom is right in discerning in this radical individualization of religion a significant vestige of the Gnostic religion. Despite their doctrinal affirmations to the contrary, the Evangelical emphasis upon experience and ecstasy is rooted in the old Gnostic conviction that man’s soul is divine by nature, and not by grace as Orthodox Tradition teaches. Bloom takes seriously the phenomenon of American religion as it really is, rather than as a continuation of the European state church, or European reformation movements. In doing so, he notes correctly two things:

First, that Evangelicalism is (or was) the majority American religion: he seems to echo the finding of Richard Quebedeaux, who wrote back in 1978 that American Evangelicalism is comprised of not only the expected Protestant revivalistic historic communities, but also major portions of Catholicism, the charismatic movement, and even Mormonism. Even by themselves, without these additions from other groups, Evangelicals count for over 26% of the population: this is significantly higher than the Mainline Protestant denominations, who account for only 18%, and even that number is rapidly decreasing.

Second, since he is not hampered by the need to demonstrate continuity with European Christendom, he is able to detect the strong commonalities that Evangelicalism shares with other members of the American religious revival tent: perhaps it is true, as Salt Lake City would like us to believe, that the Evangelicals do share a lot in common with the Mormons ... to be sure, there are many doctrinal differences: but in the religious experience, Bloom says, there is much that is similar ... he finds similarities, along the lines of his three Gnostic principles, between Evangelicalism and other American religious phenomena, like Seventh Day Adventism, even Christian Science and California Big Sur New Age-ism.

And while the former Evangelical clergyman in me cries out for justice and vindication at this moment, listing down all the doctrinal distinctions that separate my former evangelical brethren from the Adventists, the Mormons, the Witnesses, the followers of Mary Baker Eddy and the purveyors of crystals, space music and human potential, I must admit that doctrine and dogma are not so significant anymore ... even now, the Seventh Day Adventists are welcomed as one of their own by Evangelicals (they were actually one of the expert presenters in the last Church Growth Conference I attended at Fuller Seminary) ... even now, many in the Evangelical world are starting to experiment with the notion that Mormons can be received into their category.

But we may be at a watershed moment in American religious history. It appears that Evangelicalism has reached its high water mark, and now the tide is beginning to ebb. For years, the fastest growing religious group was the Evangelicals: that is simply no longer the case. It is, as we have said earlier, the Unaffiliated group.

There are several reasons why the Evangelicals have lost this leading position, and may be heading into a decline. One is certainly the effect of the constant change of affiliation and fragmentation that exists among the Evangelicals. Another reason may turn out to be the rigid political affiliation encouraged by Evangelical leaders.

But there are deeper reasons. Enthusiasm, not doctrine, is the keynote of the American religion, whether it is manifested in Evangelical or other forms. Monsignor Ronald Knox wrote an important, and I think brilliant, historical study on this subject: *Enthusiasm, a Chapter in the History of Religion* (1950). In it, he writes:

*Enthusiasm does not maintain itself at fever heat: dance as you will, flap your hands as you will, you cannot conjure up the old days when people rolled on the floor in agonies of conviction, and talked in strange sounds.* (p. 565)

Enthusiasm cannot be pursued as a goal. And even when it comes, it exhausts the subject and insinuates a cynicism toward religion. There are entire regions in the US which are called “burnt over districts.” I think that Evangelicalism as a whole is entering the “burnt over phase.” It has been mightily disappointed by political misfortune in the last year. It has suffered the scandalous offense of some of its top leaders. It has also suffered the aggregate result of failure to catechize, failure to indoctrinate, failure to draw the link between theology and ethics. It has permitted the free migration of people from one denomination to another, and in so doing, it has diminished the faith commitments of every denomination.

That is why the Evangelicals are entering a time of decrease. Their particular form of truncated Christian religion may have been possible in an America where Natural Law was upheld in civil society – in other words, when the culture was “philosophical” as opposed to “psychological.” In that temporary environment, the American religion was *complemented* by culture: the evangelical hope was that society could do the “wisdom” part of philosophy, while religion could do the “gospel” (as truncated as it was). But now that we have entered a therapeutic culture in which *there is no wisdom tradition*. The culture’s gravitation pulls religion toward a gnostic experientialism: in such a toxic environment, evangelicalism cannot survive as a dominant religion. It will not. It is not.

There are just as many reasons why the Unaffiliated group is gaining. We should look at this category like a separate religion, and see what it has to offer.

The Unaffiliated group offers complete individualistic freedom. You can pursue any passion or desire as long as “you don’t hurt anyone else.” If you do get hurt or get down in the dumps, you can join a twelve-step group if you’re middle class, or get plastic surgery if you’re in a higher tax bracket. You can modify God according to your tastes, and take your cafeteria tray to the smorgasbord of all religions: a little Sufi-ism here, a little Zen Buddhism there, a little Kabbala and a few Christian mystics, Jakob Boehme and even the Hesychasts.

You don't have to stick around in any single framework, because you are Unaffiliated, and you don't have to put up with anything difficult or unpopular.

This “not having to stick around” and avoidance of difficult responsibility has turned out to be an important commodity in the American religious market ... and it describes so well the American genius at this moment.

Recently, a new book came out from Barna pollster David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons: *unChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity... and why it matters*. In this important new study of Americans between the ages of 16 and 29, the authors write this (as cited in [Terry Mattingly](#)):

*Most [of this age group, which they call “Mosaics and Busters”] ... have an enormous amount of firsthand experience with Christians and the Christian faith. The vast majority of “outsiders” (“unaffiliated”) within the Mosaic and Buster generations have been to church before; most have attended at least one church for several months; and nearly nine out of every 10 say they know Christians personally, having about five friends who are believers."Here's the bottom line, according to their research: "Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than what we are for."*

“Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against.” That indictment says two things. On one hand, it speaks of some of the negative consequences of the Evangelical participation in politics. But on the other, and more important, hand, it speaks of this particular group's aversion to leadership in the spiritual realm: leadership and hierarchy, even a Personal God, are all obstacles to the immediate apprehension of the Infinite – which should sound familiar, as this is the old Gnostic dream.

“Spirituality” in the new American genius, which calls our young like the sirens called Odysseus, is mystical ecstasy without morality. It is experience without dogma. It is prayer that is uttered in an echo chamber. It is a religion that has stripped meaning away from the physical world: there is no Creation, because there is no Creator (since evolution is used mainly by American gnostics to eradicate the dogma of Incarnation and the wisdom tradition of Natural Law). It is a religion that has fully embraced the therapeutic culture, and has made a full entrance into gnosis.

This is the reason why the new generation of unaffiliates are so patently anti-authoritative. They do not hate adults. It's simply that they live in a different world, and are impatient with us primitives who will not evolve from the old.

At Christ the Saviour Seminary in Johnstown, I teach an experimental course on “American Society and Religion,” in which we are trying to study the contours of American culture in a hyper-technological, post-modern age. We are looking at

various religious groups, Christian and non-Christian. And we are paying close attention to the markings of the “Unaffiliated Category.”

One of my students told us that he and his brother grew up as Catholic Altar Boys, part of a devout family who didn’t miss the weekly Mass.

Over the years, things have changed. Marc is now a candidate for the Holy Orthodox Priesthood. His brother, however, is far from the faith, and is living quite contently in the Unaffiliated group. Marc interviewed his brother about why he left the faith. Here is part of his poignant interview:

*What would make you reconsider going to church again?*

*A miracle. If a higher power confronted me in a real time at a real place and told me that in order to save my life and the rest of the world, I needed to attend church, then I would go. Far fetched? Well that's my feelings about going to church. It is not a place I feel I need to go in order to have a conversation with god. And the club of people that are in church does not want me there any more than I want to be there in the first place.*

*I make my silent peace with God on my own time every day. That to me is true religion and faith - looking inwardly and knowing that you are alive because of God, you are there to serve him - but you have the right to appreciate that and be thankful for that in your own way. To each his own.*

*Do you believe in God?*

*Most Definitely*

*Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?*

*No. I think Jesus is a human and God is not a human. Therefore Jesus is the son of Mary and Joseph, not God. J.C. however, took on the role as servant and messenger of God. Did God bestow this on J.C? I doubt it; I think J.C. just took it upon himself.*

*Are you "spiritual but non-religious"? If so, what do you mean?*

*Yes - I really think I answered that already.*

*Why do you think more Americans are opting to stop practicing their faith?*

*I think most Americans are opting to stop practicing their faith because they no longer feel that the religion that they were raised as is leading them along the most fair and healthy life. I think a lot of people view religions that govern behavior as being archaic and sometimes lacking common decency and sense. And I also think that Americans view Christianity as hypocritical at times.*

At the end of a recent address to presidents of Christian colleges, the Barna pollster, David Kinnaman, was trying to make sense of the foreboding signs of the near future. This is what he said:

*We have been the party in power for several hundred years," said Kinnaman. "That gives us a different kind of challenge, a different set of opportunities. ... We have been so busy trying to be a Christian nation that I think we may have forgotten what it means to follow Christ.*

Without sounding complacent or triumphalist, the Orthodox Church is here in America to teach the Unaffiliated, the disaffected, the burnt-out revivalists, the evangelicals who worry about encroaching Gnosticism, that very thing: just what it means to follow Christ.

### 3) The American Genius – Part 3

When Orthodoxy arrived here, what it tried to do, in a sort of naïve optimism or friendliness, was to look for commonalities and similarities with the native American religion, its peculiar Protestantism. In doing so, Orthodox missionary-immigrants discovered certain beliefs that appeared to be articles of the Nicene Creed, and certain cultural manifestations (e.g., crosses in the churches) that appeared to sound familiar from Holy Tradition

But in the fervent search for commonalities, the Orthodox mission has overlooked the significance of difference ... it is the separation from Holy Tradition that provides for us the most significant information about what is peculiar to America, her genius, and where we ought to travel to arrive at her center ... in other words, where we, in completing the work of Cyril and Methodios, need to go to reach the heart of the indigenous people, the "national consciousness" America

When we think about Sts Cyril and Methodius established pattern of mission. They set the groundwork for probably the greatest conversion of all time.

Their program is well known: the translation of Church language into the vernacular, the leading of the native people to theosis and development of indigenous leadership.

But we should notice that this glorious example of the Apostles to the Slavs is itself an application – or unfolding – of Our Lord’s instruction to the Seventy Apostles in Luke 10:

*When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house."*

The goal of the Orthodox Gospel Mission, wherever we go, is to proclaim, “Peace to the House” ... to go to where the people live, and to bring the Peace that passes understanding – the gracious atmosphere of the Holy Trinity – to the people in their language and in their land ... the establishment of Orthodoxy in the heart of the city, at the very hearthstone of the country.

Now I know this sounds like familiar stuff of evangelism: but we need to go beyond an immediate discussion of techniques, like the setting up of billboards, advertising and distribution of tracts, the putting up of tract racks, the scheduling of Celebrity events and even Christian rock concerts.

Without demeaning (for now) any of these techniques, I simply ask that we hold off from programming and planning, and spend some moments instead in

thinking of mission, the Gospel, and what it means to bring Orthodoxy to America.

We need to think more deeply about what we mean by the ambiguous term, “evangelism” ... the aim of this conference today -- “the presentation of the Orthodox Gospel to the American genius” -- is about the most cogent, helpful “framing” of evangelism I’ve encountered

The presentation of the Orthodox Gospel to the American genius is a phrase that penetrates deeply into a question with two distinct parts: first, the object of our mission, the people and place, the house that needs peace ... and second, the nature of that “Peace” itself, the Gospel, the Orthodoxy that transcends all its national, ethnic appearances.

Specifically, we will take a look at the character of the American culture – its ethos – and how we can proclaim the Orthodox Gospel to that culture and in that language ... the American language is more than words ... it is a way of thinking, an album of memories, and book of stories, and a “yellow brick road” of historic desires.

The best indicator of the American genius is her actual and popular religion. To do this, we will take an interesting turn toward a rather obscure academic discipline – and that is the school of “religious criticism.”

The best religious critic is a controversial literary critic by the name of Harold Bloom. He is not Christian by a long shot. He identifies himself as a “non-practicing Jewish gnostic.”

Oddly enough, his Gnosticism actually serves us well here, as it is more sensitive to the enormous gnostic currents in American religion. These currents are consistently missed by most religious historians, especially on the Protestant side of religious history.

This religious criticism of American religion that Bloom offers reveals that it is, especially in contrast to its European antecedents, profoundly *gnostic*.

This explains a conundrum that has bedeviled American religious historians. We have always wondered why European Protestantism and even Catholicism have changed once it reached these shores.

One common reason is the dominance of post-enlightenment culture. You hear this theory in Franky Schaefer’s description of the New England worship service as something based upon the town hall meeting.

Another common theory blames the legacy of Puritanism, with all its anti-Church and pro-congregational sentiment.

Consequently, we in Orthodoxy have sought to answer these legacies with history and doctrinal lessons: all of which show that Orthodoxy is an unbroken witness to apostolic succession, worship and dogma.

Time will tell whether that rational appeal will succeed: but it does risk the possibility of becoming just another of America's seemingly-endless panoply of denominations who all say this very same thing.

I have often wondered whether this was the right approach for us in America. Don't get me wrong: these things about historic and doctrinal continuity need to be said, simply because it is true ... but will it *work*? Is this argument, for our time and place in America, rhetorically effective?

I don't think so ... one reason for this is because Americans do not care much about doctrine ... they care little about the truth about God, and certainly less about Natural Law (or God's expectations/wisdom found in Creation and articulated through scripture/tradition), and least about Christianity and the Church.

The common dismissal here is well-known: "doctrine" and "dogma" have now become cuss words in American linguistics ... they are accused of producing "intolerance" and an evil condition called "closed-mindedness," which is the only pathology in secular psychiatry that is allowed to have a moral etiology.

The other reason is that Americans don't really care much about history ... this present culture, no matter what we call it, is "present-oriented," even "present-imprisoned" ... we have been told this before by the likes of Marshall McLuhan. This, by the way, is the real reason why graveyards are being given the miss, and cremations have become such an enthusiastic industry: it erases the past. Graveyards are spooky with memory. Urns just don't have that ambiance, that hard reality of tragedy, the unavoidable signification of the psychic need for salvation.

As such, America's entire culture has turned toward a therapeutic yearning for comfortable-ness, as we've already heard from Philip Rieff. The problem with this therapeutic culture, he notes, is that it hides a central deception: "the therapeutic age, for all its bluster about human potential and personal fulfillment, is inherently un-therapeutic and even, in some respects, antihuman" (*Triumph*, xi).

The main reason why America is resistant to doctrine and history – and is particularly resistant to Orthodoxy – is because her "genius," or her "national consciousness," is profoundly gnostic. This "real religion" is sometimes at odds with the stated or claimed religion, and so it is understood by an examination of behavior and values – especially in light of the fact that our culture is no longer "philosophical," but "therapeutic." This examination has been done admirably well by Harold Bloom, in his rather neglected book, *The American Religion*.



American Gnosticism is summed up nicely by Bloom in this passage:

*What I call the American Religion ... seems to me to have three fundamental principles. The first is that what is best and oldest in us goes back well before Creation, and so is no part of the Creation. The second is that what makes us free is knowledge, a history of facts and events, rather than a belief founded upon mere assent. The third is that this freedom has a solitary element in it, an element imbued by the loneliness of belated American time, and the American experience of the abyss of space. What holds these principles together is the American persuasion, however muted or obscured, that we are mortal gods, destined to find ourselves again in worlds as yet undiscovered. (Bloom, *The American Religion*, p99)*

In the first point, which is the most startling, there is the ancient Gnostic belief that the soul is uncreated and is as old as God. This can easily be seen in Mormonism. But for the Evangelicals, the picture is more complicated. As a group, they hold to most of the articles of the Nicene Creed – in fact, all of them if you permit their redefinition of terms like “baptism,” “Apostolic,” and “Church.”

But there is that nagging persistence in Evangelicalism for personalized religion. The Megachurch movement has been successful because it treats the church-goer like a customer, who gets to choose from a smorgasbord lineup of various experiences a whole cafeteria tray that will satisfy his individual tastes and needs. It turns out that the biggest need, and the most successful commodity, of the Evangelical mega-church is anonymity, unaccountability, and evasion of responsibility.

Think of it: you could go to 20,000-attende church, and no one will know that you're on the outs with your wife and that last week you got picked up for DUI. Think of it: you could go to church and believe that Jesus and Buddha and Mohammad were three great guys with good ideas, and you might as well vote for all three just to cover the bases: you're not accountable for your beliefs and no one will know.

Think of it: you could attend as often as you want – or more likely, as seldom as you want – and the church budget won't take a hit as it would in all the Orthodox parishes I know. There are too many in a megachurch for you to feel responsible for your time, your money and your faithfulness.

There is also, in Evangelicalism, a thirst for experience that eclipses any importance of doctrine or truth. What matters, the Evangelical will tell you, is *heart knowledge* as opposed to head knowledge. What matters is a conversion experience, even an ecstatic experience that is well known to Gnostics and neo-platonists of all ages – the individual, solitary psychic ascension from the created world into an individualized confrontation with the Infinite.

“Take Jesus as your personal Saviour” is the common denominator that links all Evangelicals and Charismatics, many Catholics and even Mormons together. I think Harold Bloom is right in discerning in this radical individualization of religion a significant vestige of the Gnostic religion. Despite their doctrinal affirmations to the contrary, the Evangelical emphasis upon experience and ecstasy is rooted in the old Gnostic conviction that man’s soul is divine by nature, and not by grace as Orthodox Tradition teaches. Bloom takes seriously the phenomenon of American religion as it really is, rather than as a continuation of the European state church, or European reformation movements. In doing so, he notes correctly two things:

First, that Evangelicalism is (or was) the majority American religion: he seems to echo the finding of Richard Quebedeaux, who wrote back in 1978 that American Evangelicalism is comprised of not only the expected Protestant revivalistic historic communities, but also major portions of Catholicism, the charismatic movement, and even Mormonism. Even by themselves, without these additions from other groups, Evangelicals count for over 26% of the population: this is significantly higher than the Mainline Protestant denominations, who account for only 18%, and even that number is rapidly decreasing.

Second, since he is not hampered by the need to demonstrate continuity with European Christendom, he is able to detect the strong commonalities that Evangelicalism shares with other members of the American religious revival tent: perhaps it is true, as Salt Lake City would like us to believe, that the Evangelicals do share a lot in common with the Mormons ... to be sure, there are many doctrinal differences: but in the religious experience, Bloom says, there is much that is similar ... he finds similarities, along the lines of his three Gnostic principles, between Evangelicalism and other American religious phenomena, like Seventh Day Adventism, even Christian Science and California Big Sur New Age-ism.

And while the former Evangelical clergyman in me cries out for justice and vindication at this moment, listing down all the doctrinal distinctions that separate my former evangelical brethren from the Adventists, the Mormons, the Witnesses, the followers of Mary Baker Eddy and the purveyors of crystals, space music and human potential, I must admit that doctrine and dogma are not so significant anymore ... even now, the Seventh Day Adventists are welcomed as one of their own by Evangelicals (they were actually one of the expert presenters in the last Church Growth Conference I attended at Fuller Seminary) ... even now, many in the Evangelical world are starting to experiment with the notion that Mormons can be received into their category.

But we may be at a watershed moment in American religious history. It appears that Evangelicalism has reached its high water mark, and now the tide is beginning to ebb. For years, the fastest growing religious group was the Evangelicals: that is simply no longer the case. It is, as we have said earlier, the Unaffiliated group.

There are several reasons why the Evangelicals have lost this leading position, and may be heading into a decline. One is certainly the effect of the constant change of affiliation and fragmentation that exists among the Evangelicals. Another reason may turn out to be the rigid political affiliation encouraged by Evangelical leaders.

But there are deeper reasons. Enthusiasm, not doctrine, is the keynote of the American religion, whether it is manifested in Evangelical or other forms. Monsignor Ronald Knox wrote an important, and I think brilliant, historical study on this subject: *Enthusiasm, a Chapter in the History of Religion* (1950). In it, he writes:

*Enthusiasm does not maintain itself at fever heat: dance as you will, flap your hands as you will, you cannot conjure up the old days when people rolled on the floor in agonies of conviction, and talked in strange sounds.* (p. 565)

Enthusiasm cannot be pursued as a goal. And even when it comes, it exhausts the subject and insinuates a cynicism toward religion. There are entire regions in the US which are called “burnt over districts.” I think that Evangelicalism as a whole is entering the “burnt over phase.” It has been mightily disappointed by political misfortune in the last year. It has suffered the scandalous offense of some of its top leaders. It has also suffered the aggregate result of failure to catechize, failure to indoctrinate, failure to draw the link between theology and ethics. It has permitted the free migration of people from one denomination to another, and in so doing, it has diminished the faith commitments of every denomination.

That is why the Evangelicals are entering a time of decrease. Their particular form of truncated Christian religion may have been possible in an America where Natural Law was upheld in civil society – in other words, when the culture was “philosophical” as opposed to “psychological.” In that temporary environment, the American religion was *complemented* by culture: the evangelical hope was that society could do the “wisdom” part of philosophy, while religion could do the “gospel” (as truncated as it was). But now that we have entered a therapeutic culture in which *there is no wisdom tradition*. The culture’s gravitation pulls religion toward a gnostic experientialism: in such a toxic environment, evangelicalism cannot survive as a dominant religion. It will not. It is not.

There are just as many reasons why the Unaffiliated group is gaining. We should look at this category like a separate religion, and see what it has to offer.

The Unaffiliated group offers complete individualistic freedom. You can pursue any passion or desire as long as “you don’t hurt anyone else.” If you do get hurt or get down in the dumps, you can join a twelve-step group if you’re middle class, or get plastic surgery if you’re in a higher tax bracket. You can modify God according to your tastes, and take your cafeteria tray to the smorgasbord of all religions: a little Sufi-ism here, a little Zen Buddhism there, a little Kabbala and a few Christian mystics, Jakob Boehme and even the Hesychasts.

You don't have to stick around in any single framework, because you are Unaffiliated, and you don't have to put up with anything difficult or unpopular.

This "not having to stick around" and avoidance of difficult responsibility has turned out to be an important commodity in the American religious market ... and it describes so well the American genius at this moment.

Recently, a new book came out from Barna pollster David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons: *unChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity... and why it matters*. In this important new study of Americans between the ages of 16 and 29, the authors write this (as cited in [Terry Mattingly](#)):

*Most [of this age group, which they call "Mosaics and Busters"] ... have an enormous amount of firsthand experience with Christians and the Christian faith. The vast majority of "outsiders" ("unaffiliated") within the Mosaic and Buster generations have been to church before; most have attended at least one church for several months; and nearly nine out of every 10 say they know Christians personally, having about five friends who are believers."Here's the bottom line, according to their research: "Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than what we are for."*

"Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against." That indictment says two things. On one hand, it speaks of some of the negative consequences of the Evangelical participation in politics. But on the other, and more important, hand, it speaks of this particular group's aversion to leadership in the spiritual realm: leadership and hierarchy, even a Personal God, are all obstacles to the immediate apprehension of the Infinite – which should sound familiar, as this is the old Gnostic dream.

"Spirituality" in the new American genius, which calls our young like the sirens called Odysseus, is mystical ecstasy without morality. It is experience without dogma. It is prayer that is uttered in an echo chamber. It is a religion that has stripped meaning away from the physical world: there is no Creation, because there is no Creator (since evolution is used mainly by American gnostics to eradicate the dogma of Incarnation and the wisdom tradition of Natural Law). It is a religion that has fully embraced the therapeutic culture, and has made a full entrance into gnosis.

This is the reason why the new generation of unaffiliates are so patently anti-authoritative. They do not hate adults. It's simply that they live in a different world, and are impatient with us primitives who will not evolve from the old.

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various religious groups, Christian and non-Christian. And we are paying close attention to the markings of the "Unaffiliated Category."

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*Do you believe in God?*

*Most Definitely*

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*Are you "spiritual but non-religious"? If so, what do you mean?*

*Yes - I really think I answered that already.*

*Why do you think more Americans are opting to stop practicing their faith?*

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*We have been the party in power for several hundred years," said Kinnaman. "That gives us a different kind of challenge, a different set of opportunities. ... We have been so busy trying to be a Christian nation that I think we may have forgotten what it means to follow Christ.*

Without sounding complacent or triumphalist, the Orthodox Church is here in America to teach the Unaffiliated, the disaffected, the burnt-out revivalists, the evangelicals who worry about encroaching Gnosticism, that very thing: just what it means to follow Christ.

#### **4) The American Gospel – Orthodoxy at the end of the Sawdust Trail**

The American Gnostic experience is not harmless, as much as our modern unaffiliated, anti-authoritarian spiritualists fervently believe. It always turns out to be full of peril and jeopardy, and is the culprit for much of the nation's anxiety, depression, immaturity and irrationality.

The American Gnostic experience seeks to experience the divine, but *outside* the protective communion provided by Jesus Christ and His Body, the Apostolic Church.

The American experience seeks gnosis, or knowledge, outside of the Apostolic Dogma.

It seeks ecstasy, outside of the discipline of *ascesis* ... outside of the grace resident in Eucharist, Baptism and Chrismation and all the Mysteries.

The American Gnostic urge is a romantic foray into a bodiless solitude or aloneness.

Despite its naïve enthusiasm that is the golden fleece of all romantic endeavor, this urge is really an attempt to launch out alone into the Mystical Fire, the Uncreated Light.

And as the Fathers warned us repeatedly: to enter the Uncreated Light naked, and autonomously, without the garment of righteousness granted by Baptism and bestowed under the Name of Jesus Christ ... to be so foolish and irrational ... to do this outside of the exclusive, Only-Begotten Son of God ...

This experience, shorn of its glittering signs, is just another word for Hades – perdition in the here-and-now.

This is why we protest against passion and warn against heresy. While passion makes the soul sick with the leaden shackles of spite and regret, unbelief, faithlessness and this present darkness of Gnosticism makes the soul *worse* than sick: it makes it inherently insane. It has already done so with Satan and his rebel angels.

You might be surprised at this practical effect of Gnosticism, which itself is the end-state of all heresy (including mainline arianism). There are many examples I can give, but I will give you one from a rather well-known track from a well-known rock band. Rock music is the place to go for gnostic prophecy, after all, and this particular band is articulate in that regard:

*There is no pain you are receding  
A distant ship smoke on the horizon  
You are only coming through in waves  
Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying  
When I was a child  
I caught a fleeting glimpse  
Out of the corner of my eye  
I turned to look but it was gone  
I cannot put my finger on it now  
The child is grown  
The dream is gone  
And I have become comfortably numb*

How do we respond to this latent Gnosticism in the American genius – a latency that is now becoming more and more active and explicit?

We begin by not ignoring it, or settling for appearances.

But instead, we follow the lead of the Apostles themselves, who *also* – in their day – faced a nascent, burgeoning Gnostic movement that consumed a significant portion of the first generations of the Church.

Their courageous, Spirit-led, ecclesiastical response is why we have the Canon of Holy Scripture today, and why we are blessed with the Doctrine of Apostolic Succession.

We should look especially to the Apostolic response to Gnosticism, which is germane in most of the Epistles, especially the First Epistle of John the Theologian.

In this simple, elegant and luminous letter, St. John emphasized the exclusivity of the Incarnate Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. St. John identified the Grace of the Holy Trinity as the Light, and that Jesus Christ is the Son of God the Father and Creator.

He emphasized that there was to be no individualized, solitary confrontation with the Infinite. Instead, we are to love our brother, to walk in the Light, and to have fellowship with the Church of Christ, and to abide in Christ as the Son of God.

Here is the lesson of First John for American Orthodoxy, in this gnostic new age:

- Enhance the teaching of dogma, even at the expense of political clarity.
  - Make explicit the Tri-Personal, Single-Essential Fellowship of the Trinity vs implicit diffuse Gnosticism of the world
  - Make explicit the Incarnation: the exclusive identification of Jesus Christ in His Two Natures as Saviour, vs the constant gravitational tide of Arianism in the heterodox community



- Be identified more with the dogma that we are *for*; more than the positions that we are *against*
- Enhance catechism in terms of sequence of Bible as the great narthex of dogma: every story should point to an article of the Nicene Creed ... and in turn, the Bible and the Fathers should point toward theosis and the struggle against passions

We must recognize that Orthodox dogma – Trinity and Incarnation – is not just a prerequisite for membership in our club ... it is a prerequisite for *sanity* in a decadent civilization that is driven to *insanity* by its increasing proximity to Hades

We must teach Americans the Apostolic thought-patterns of Christian symbol – not *again*, for they never really knew it, but for the very first time ... in a better way of saying the same thing, we must teach Americans how to pray – not *again*, for they have never really heard the fullness of the Theology of the Trinity and the Economy of the Incarnation ... we know this for sure, since Americans typically like to claim that they can pray outside of religion, and that dogma only ties them down: in the truth of apostolic indoctrination, one knows instead that doctrine and prayer are intertwined – indeed, they are pre-requisites of each other, and both are founded upon the ascesis of love.

(*Dogma is liberation*: and the quicker we can make that clear by our authenticity, the less miserable we will be.)

We must teach Americans how to pray in the American language: it is an album of memories of open spaces and spectacular places, of tycoons and blue-collar steelworkers and coalminers, of shopkeepers who barbecue on weekends and crowd at football games ... it is a language chock full of incomplete memories and an aversion to doctrine and philosophy, childlike, sometimes *childish*, always hoping, usually disappointed ... it is a language of dreams and outright pagan fantasy ... it is an incomplete language – language of predicates and objects, verbs and clauses, prepositions and adjectives – a language that waits upon a Subject, a cornerstone of Orthodox Gospel ... in other words, the American language is waiting for the Word

We must teach Americans how to be Orthodox, to think Orthodox and do Orthodoxy in their own local America. Let us help Americans get over their wanderlust and demand for the greener grass and learn how to stay and pray. Let us renounce the commercial entrepreneurial claims of the Church Growth Movement and bloom where we are planted.

Finally, we must reveal to Americans the real destination of Orthodoxy at the end of the historic Sawdust Trail: a destination of Repentance and Theosis.

The only way to reveal this Sawdust Trail is Sainthood, and nothing less. Not jurisdictional unity. Not ecumenicity. Not modernization. Not liturgical reform.

Not commercialization, commodification, and selling our children to the bitch goddess of success.

It is Sainthood that is the destiny we fail at our peril: and every American knows this deep within the heart of his American Soul. How is an American to know the possibility of theosis unless he is shown the possibility of the Way, by an Orthodox American who has gone from possibility to realization?

### **Concluding Postscript**

Newton Booth Tarkington is not to be mistaken for the 1942 Orson Welles distorted treatment of his best known novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*. This forgotten book, which used to be well-read, chronicles the conversion of Indianapolis from a city where "No one was very rich; few were very poor; the air was clean, and there was time to live" – to a "city nesting dingily in the fog of its own smoke ..." Tarkington noted that "Bigness – the god of all good American hearts" had turned his Indianapolis into a sprawling greedy place that had become "hurried, hard, unsafe, inhuman."

I would add, from the perch of my own front porch in East Pittsburgh that looks out upon an empty Westinghouse plant, that after the tragedies of industrialization and World War II, there is the even more spirit-destroying revolution of "media-zation" – whose power has grown from the press to the radio, from TV to a globalized Internet-enabled web of virtual reality.

The late Russell Kirk once wrote an essay entitled "Donald Davidson and the South's Conservatism." Kirk, in this essay, celebrates Davidson's constant call to arms against the encroachments of "Leviathan" – an especially pungent icon of "the omnipotent nation-state, what Tocqueville called democratic despotism, the political collectivity that reduces men and women to social atoms."

Kirk lauds Davidson and his other Southern Agrarian confreres who all insisted "... that society is something *more* than the Gross National Product; that the country lane is healthier than the Long Street; that more wisdom lies in *Tradition* than in Scientism; that Leviathan is a devourer, not a savior."

Those are Kirk's words – no mean rhetoric, that. But then Kirk concludes with Davidson's words from *I'll Take My Stand*:

*[Some] moderns prefer to grasp the particular. They want something to engage both their reason and their love. They distrust the advice of John Dewey to 'use foresight of the future to refine and expand present activities.' The future is not yet; it is unknowable, intangible. But the past was, the present is; of that they can be sure. So they attach themselves – or reattach themselves – to a home-section, one of the sections, great or small, defined in the long conquest of our continental area. They seek spiritual and cultural autonomy ... They are learning how to meet the*

*subtlest and most dangerous foe of humanity – the tyranny that wears the mask of humanitarianism and benevolence. They are attacking Leviathan.*

The past *was*. The present *is*. These are Orthodox words: and it is especially Orthodox to figure out that the Dewey-ite "future" of the industrialists is demonic fantasy.

Bill Kauffman, and Davidson, Russell Kirk, Wendell Berry, and "rural Catholics" and "Jeffersonian Protestants" – they worry rightly that Leviathan is succeeding. But they also point out that Leviathan can be fought. Their prescription is for the preservation of the local and the particular, in the face of leveling centralization.

I suggest, instead, that we cherish the concrete, the permanent, and the icon (which is as particular an enduring symbol can get). These words carry much of the same meaning. But they also carry the cachet of sign, sacrament, even the Chalcedonic witness of divinity and humanity unified without confusion.

From these regionalists (who actually like the word "anarchical" -- albeit in an idiosyncratic sense), Orthodox Christians in America must take good advice. It is time that we American Orthodox learn not only about Orthodoxy, but about being American -- and it appears to me that regionalists possess an American understanding that far outstrips the wan sort of historiography we've been spoonfed.

We Orthodox may think we know America, perhaps from the news or from our annual visits to Americana on Thanksgiving, July 4th and Memorial Day.

But we are mostly immigrants who arrived when industrialization was already in full swing. We have only seen the hyper-commercialized America that was served up by our big company and big party bosses, with pie-in-the-sky notions like "the American Dream."

But we Orthodox do not really know Jefferson or Lincoln, don't we? Neither do we know much about Mark Twain (except for Mssrs. Sawyer and Finn), or Frost (except for his "miles to go before I sleep")? For heaven's sake, we do not know much about Mother Jones and Dorothy Day – which a surprising thing, since most of our first immigrant forebears were much concerned with the movement of these labor marshals. We have not met the American genius, haven't we? Consequently, we think that to be an American church we must become and do whatever the national protestant churches are becoming and doing (generally trying on their hand-me-downs in moth-eaten obsolescence).

But we miss the point that these very protestant movements have been co-opted by the *very movement* we are trying now to resist: the mega-church, on one hand, is a hyper-capitalist social structure decorated with Biblical language. The

National Council of Churches, on the other hand, is an anti-traditional socialist movement for guilty rich Westerners.

Both are signs of Leviathan.

In our attempts to "be" the American church, we discard -- sometimes with force and with regrettable Fahrenheit 451 fury -- all those smallish, embarrassing antiques from our immigrant past. We converts are much to be blamed for this "colonial" behavior. We moan like wind in the rigging about the appearance of foreign language and foreign custom in our ecclesial activities, and like peckish harpies we blame improprieties on the presence of hierarchy and Tradition, and demand a modernization of order.

Meanwhile, our very embarrassments may become our salvation, for that slavish particularity often disqualifies us from the homogenizing siren call of Leviathan -- we are left shipless on the dock, while the more attractive and sortable sorts -- the Mad Men and Desperate Housewives of less demanding denominations--are ushered into the Titanic. The very agents of our chafing -- about which we complain most (like administrative and jurisdictional chaos; inefficient coordination; the panic of suburbanites who have no bulletin with which to follow a Liturgy they cannot understand -- may become at the end the very means for our escape from this present lawless temptation ... the temptation of Leviathan to become inexorably the same -- consumers on their way to diminishing levels of ecstasy, becoming more and more part of a homogenous dehumanized matrix of the Beast.

By all means the Liturgy should be understood by the people. Sts. Cyril and Methodios taught us that much. But at the same time, God leads people through history to learn about place and person, and to grow a culture from the collection of these souvenir educations. Just as much as the South should retain grits and her drawl and the country should rediscover her agrarian liberty ... so should we immigrant Orthodox become American Regionalists by reveling in the very things that too many earnest evangelism experts urge us to discard.

Traveling to the heart of a nation is what the two Thessalonians did, with grace. We have not yet completed this journey. And really, we have far to go. We thought the heart of America was in Washington DC or New York. We thought we needed some single office that would speak for all Orthodox to American politicians. This is nice balderdash: for one thing, American politicians never listen to religious leaders ... for another thing, who can speak for all Orthodox Christians in America except God?

Neither city is anywhere near the America we need to love.

Just because we have not yet met the heart of America, her "genius" (in the old sense of the word), we do not notice the coalescing of Leviathan, the servile unification of Wall Street and the State. We watch the red downward arrows and

listen to "Stormy Weather" dirges on market reports, and we track the elected stars of the political Olympus like horoscopes in People magazine, and we think we understand the American moment.

No, we do not.

We must *know* Orthodoxy and America to be the American Orthodox Church. I worry that we do not, nearly enough for either, *just yet*.

We must know more of Leviathan to fight it. We must know more of America to save it. We must know more of Orthodoxy, in faithfulness, to *proclaim* it – existentially, authentically, mystically, naturally and supernaturally, *face to face*.

For Leviathan, after all, must be fought. Leviathan denies the Incarnation: it must deny, for the Incarnation always disrupts its Tower-building and frustrates the language of virtual reality and reveals it as just so much Babel-ish.

The Incarnation is the supreme Local Event, as the Resurrection is Cosmic in Mind and Time.

Leviathan, all grown up, is the Beast. The Church in her Orthodox American concreteness, as local, agrarian, American Gothic, ethnic and folkish, must take her stand.

The heart of America is further than you think, if you think it is somewhere else or some other time. The heart of America is your backyard, your town, your block, your parish with all its foibles and warts and pirohi, and men and women about whom you sometimes complain, but to whom you will bow one day in the vicinity of theosis.

What America received of Christianity before Orthodoxy was a truncated vision ... an abbreviation, at best, of the Gospel.

But what America needs now is the full-fledged Wisdom that apprehends Natural Law, and the Apostolic *theoria* that proclaims Jesus Christ and His *present* millennial Kingdom.

I did not mean to be so dark about the American prospect. The commercial America and the globalized America, the hyper-technologized and media and World Wide Web broadcast America is probably as dark, or even darker than what we've let on.

But in every American there is still the native land and a hope for the old Republic, with the beautiful spacious skies like a starry roof over the home of the brave. You can still see this in your own people, as they pray together, work and laugh together, comfort each other in their mutual sadness and play softball on the summer diamond.

To illustrate the dark desert of Gnosticism, I quoted a haunting, but mournful lyric from the rock scene. To end all this on a more positive, hopeful note, I'd like to quote a rather famous musician, who in his own short words inimitably sums up the American who stands in the Macedonian vision.

His name is Bruce Springsteen, and I heartily recommend, for your research into the American genius, that you listen to his last three albums.

In a recent interview with *Rolling Stone* (no. 1071, 2/5/09), Springsteen said this about the sad recent loss of his keyboard player Danny Federici, and about loss in general:

*That's just life, and it all goes on without you. The acknowledgement of time, its effects – on a good day, it's a sweetener. It makes every element of the day come to life a little more than it normally would. Because you realize it's finite – everything around you, the band, the family. In a not very long period of time, someone else will be living in this house, driving these roads. Somebody may go, 'Hey, Bruce Springsteen used to live there.' And in a little bit longer than that, they ain't gonna be saying that anymore. They're just going to be driving by ... That's the way the cards is played.*

Not all Americans are Gnostics, especially ones who are old enough and reflective enough to look *closely* at Time and Space, Moment and Place.

Many of them, even without really knowing, are walking down the sawdust trail, coming forward because they are looking for a deeper dream than riches, and a beauty and wisdom that explains the heartbreaking sunsets of September, the smell of new mown hay and the secret joys of baseball and barbecue. They are coming forward for they have sensed something eternal in the particularities of America, and they have figured out that there is a Creator God Who is Good.

They are coming forward down the old sawdust trail. And this time, it is not the old brown church in the vale.

It is the church of two Thessalonians, which has finally arrived in the heartland: it has finally understood the language of the call of the Macedonian, who looked strangely like John Wayne. That church, now understanding, has finally arrived.