

Evangelism and Culture

By Michael J. Oleska

The most obvious gospel paradigm for the theme evangelism and culture is the parable of the sower. The seed is the Word of God.

But as St. Maximos the Confessor wrote in the seventh century, the Word of God is constantly revealing himself, becoming “embodied.” The Word establishes the created universe, the heavens tell his glory, the firmament his handiwork, for it is by the Word that everything that was made came into existence and is sustained in being. The Word is embodied first of all in the entire cosmos. The Word in the Cosmos has been misunderstood, after all. It was as if the Message revealed by the Word was written, as C.S. Lewis once said, in letters too large for us to read clearly. In the pre-Christian societies, he was wrongly identified with Neptune, Zeus, Adonus, Apollo, or in the modern world with the forces of the natural world, with the “laws” of chemistry, physiology, genetics.

So in the second embodiment the Word became easier to decipher. The Word of God is also embodied in the Holy Scriptures, in some ways in amore focused and understandable form. Even there, the possibility of misinterpretation arose, and the Scribes and Pharisees were constantly criticized for missing the intended meaning of the Law and the Prophets.

So ultimately, at the fullness of time, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He is called “Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” He is called “the Messiah.” “the Christ,” the Way, the Truth and the Life.” He calls himself “the Living Bread,” “the Son of Man,” “Living Water,” “the Good Shepherd.”

All of this is the Word of God, the seed in the parable of sower- and more. The gospel is also the Church, the mystical body of Christ, and the scattered seed can refer to the evangelical establishment of the church as the faith spreads geographically throughout the world. And fullness of the gospel, of the Christian faith, is Orthodoxy. The seed then means all these-the Word of God in all embodiments, the Gospel of Repentance, of the Kingdom, the sacramental and iconographic presence of Christ, the Truth of the Orthodox faith. And none of these existed in a vacuum. The seed always requires a specific place, some oil, in which to grow.

The Word of God as scripture must be expressed in human language, and language is culture. The gospel of the kingdom must be preached in human words, and words are culture. The presence of Christ must convey, manifested with signs, symbols, art, music, liturgical action, sacrament, and all this is culture. The Truth, like the seed, needs soil in which to grow, and the soil is culture.

The seed in the parable is scattered and some grows, some does not. But even the seed that reaches maturity produces different harvests, some thirty or sixty or a hundredfold. The same truth, the same gospel, the same Christ, when introduced into specific cultural context produces a unique harvest, for different soils have different levels of fertility. Climatic conditions vary from time to time and place to place. The reception of the Word of God varies accordingly, not only as individuals hear the gospel, understand the Truth, confront Christ, enter the church, but as cultures do as well.

No one plants without expecting a harvest. The results the church anticipates and for which it prepares, the goal of all that it says and does, is revealed in the gospel passage read on more Sundays during church year than any other: John ch. 17. It is no accident that the church presents our Lord's prayer for unity to us more often than any other, for this is the ultimate goal of his life and mission, the fulfillment of the gospel. In the end, the scriptures tell us, Christ will be "all in all." He will hold us, all people of all races, nationalities, ethnic groups, political parties, religious sects and creeds, and with all others, our friends, neighbors, and the enemies Jesus Christ commanded us to forgive, to bless, to love. For those who have loved and served him -- and the neighbor the have abused, despised, rejected, exploited, hated- will be their sorrow, humiliation, their torment, their hell. Heaven and hell are not places we "go to," but spiritual conditions we are already *in*.

We must become one, the way our Lord prayed to his heavenly Father, as the Holy Trinity is one, in total humility and love, each of us fulfilling the will of the Father as the son and the Holy Spirit perfectly and eternally do. This is the end toward which the church labors and strives. The church plants the seed in order to reap this harvest. No one can be the image of the Holy Trinity alone, as isolated individual. While only human beings, by an acct of faith and commitment, can be saved, no one is saved alone. There is no such thing as an individual salvation, for salvation is to enter into the community of interpersonal love, love of God, fulfilling his will in all things, and the love of one's neighbour, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

This is the goal, the harvest the church expects, awaits, and in which it invites all humanity to participate. The church's vision, her soteriology and eschatology, while focused on Christ, is not exclusively Christocentric but Trinitarian. And the essence of his interpersonal unity-in-love, the possibly for many persons to be one, is revealed in divine love, tri-personal Agape, which, which makes the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, the three equally divine persons, one. We must always keep the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in mind in all the evangelists think, say and do. There is no place for coercion, persecution, intolerance or violence in planting the seed, in announcing the good news to the nations, for these tactics would render the ultimate goal, total Agape, unattainable.

Syncretism and enculturation

Perhaps no question is more heatedly discussed in various ecumenical mission conferences today than the attempt to distinguish theologically between syncretism and enculturation. Within the World Council of Churches, the problem, it seems to me, is that there are different kinds of seed. In this context, the temptation to syncretism is inescapable.

What is syncretism? It has been difficult if not impossible for many Protestant theologians to arrive at consensus, a definition of exactly what constitutes syncretism, but the historic, patristic Orthodox tradition offers us clear guidelines. The church, during the period of ecumenical councils, sought to express its faith in terms intelligible to Hellenic culture without being distorted, without being "contaminated" by it in the process. This was no easy task, and it required five centuries and seven councils to accomplish it. Syncretism was successfully voided. The church, guided by the Holy Spirit, did not add to its doctrines, practices, beliefs, anything extraneous or incompatible with the faith of the Apostles, the witness of sacred scripture, the Truth revealed in Christ. Syncretism is precisely the

introduction into Christian doctrine or worship elements that are incompatible with the fullness of the Apostolic tradition.

Thus, when we learned Chinese Protestant theologian attempted to include within her presentation at Canberra general assembly of the World Council of the Churches an act of reverence to the Chinese goddess of mercy, the Orthodox were correct in rejecting such an inclusion as syncretistic. There is no place for “goddesses of mercy” in Christian doctrine or piety. (Orthodox missionaries, however, encountering a culture with a personification of a merciful feminine principle might attempt to present this pre-Christian intuition as *typologically* prefiguring the Theotokos.)

If syncretism must at all costs be avoided as distorting or corrupting the gospel message, enculturation, on the other hand, is inevitable and necessary. However, enculturation is only possible when the evangelist knows the Orthodox tradition and can therefore discern what is and what is not compatible with it. Enculturation is the planting of the gospel, the seed, the presence of Christ, in the unique soil of new culture, and allowing it, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to mature at its own pace, to produce ultimately a new, indigenous church.

The Alaskan Orthodox mission

When, for example, the Valaam Mission analyzed the spirituality of the Kodiak native peoples in 1795, they expressed a willingness to tolerate certain aberrations (such as polygamy) for a short time, to discuss others (the belief in the inua/yua) and to overlook still others (for example, fasting norms).

Polygamy endured for one generation after the baptism of the Kodiak Alutiiqs. This was a necessary accommodation, since to require the separation of multiple wives from their husbands would have created severe social upheaval and economical hardship for women and children. Fasting norms could not be enforced in a land of hunter-gatherers whose food supplies were never stable or predictable, and starvation was an annual possibility. Only today, after two centuries, is fasting being gradually introduced. Everywhere, however, the reception of the gospel ended inter-tribal warfare and the enslavement and mistreatment of the prisoners. This was seldom recognized or even noticed by later observers, who had not complained that the Orthodox natives had not absorbed much doctrine, had not memorized much scripture, and thus had not, in their estimation, been properly evangelized.

Belief in the *Yua* persists. The *Yua*, in *Yup'ik* Eskimo culture, is the spirit that makes a living thing to be alive. It is the life force, which in pre-contact times was believed to be conscious but interpersonal. Animals and human beings have essentially the same *Yua*, and differ only in their outward physical form.

Animals have abilities that surpass those of human beings. They see, smell, and hear what we cannot. They have strengths and capabilities that surpass ours. They are not viewed as inferior beings, but in some ways as superior creatures. Their sensory input permits them to know things that we cannot perceive. To be changed into an animal in all native Alaskan folklore is viewed not as a curse (typical of European stories; - “the Frog Prince,” “Beauty and The Beast,” werewolves, etc.), but as a promotion. Some Alutiiq stories end with the hero deciding to remain an animal and “live happily ever after.” This belief in the intelligence, sensitivity and even superiority of the animals made traditional Alaskan peoples reverent towards the game they needed to kill in order to feed themselves, in order to

survive. And it is the universal beliefs that since the animals know more, see more, hear more, sense more, they are willing victims who offer to the hunter. But they only sacrifice themselves to feed those human beings who treat them reverently, respectfully, not only during the hunt, in the act of killing the and butchering them, but in the way the meat is thoroughly eaten, wasting none of it, and how various parts of the animal (such as the pelts) are used. The unusable remains must also be treated respectfully, returned to the habitat from which the animal was taken. Recycling is an ancient practice in the Arctic.

Orthodox missionaries did not discourage this belief that life in all its form should be treated reverently. Their Alaskan converts heard the Paschal gospel from within the context of their traditional worldview, and saw Christ in the whole created universe, the Word of God in the Cosmos, in a way even the missionaries had not seen him before. The life of the world, the life of all, yes -- all the *Yua* are really *him*. And the first chapter to the Colossians took on a meaning that was always there, but had gone unnoticed, or at least under appreciated, for centuries.

The seed found especially fertile ground, for the text "He is before all things and in him all things subsist" affirmed that what the Alaskans had intuited centuries before was now affirmed in the gospel. Only now they knew his identity. Alaskan Orthodoxy affirms a cosmic dimension to the Christian faith that many, perhaps most, modern Christians fail to grasp. John 3:16 is probably the most widely memorized verse in the New Testament, few who study the Bible in English translation grasp its full meaning the way most Eskimos do. The original text speaks of God's love for the world, and most suppose the Greek word here is *oikoumene*, the inhabited earth, the human beings, and indeed the evangelist could have chosen this word. In fact, however, he did not. This famous verse affirms "For God so loved *cosmos* the sent his son."

In the missionary context of the industrialized world, where secularism is in some instances giving way to a revival of "paganism" or the emergence of "new age" spirituality, or an interest in oriental religions, the theology of St. Maximos, in which the "logoi": of God are affirmed, in which the created universe plays a mediating and sanctifying role in God's divine plan, which the cosmos is to be blessed, reclaimed, transfigured and transformed, sanctified and blessed to become "the Kingdom of our God and His Christ" presents a Christian alternative. The Alaskan church goes forth in procession each January for the great blessing of water, in most places walking on the frozen river, standing on the ice in subzero temperatures, to sanctify the one small piece of the cosmos on which their lives have always depended. The river is their highway, their cleansing, their supermarket, their home, their life. In their pre-Christian past they thanked the animal spirits for offering themselves, sacrificing themselves to feed the people, and put their inflated intestines and bladders through the holes in the ice in order to recycle their *Yua*. Now they go to the river and bless the waters, putting the cross through a cruciform hole in the ice; it is Christ they bless, Christ they thank, for his sacrifice, prefigured in the cycle of the natural world as they understood it.

This not, I would submit, syncretistic, for these patterns were always there, in the liturgical life of the church. The gospel texts were always there, within the hearing of all believers. But the Eskimos have discovered a meaning hidden from those of other cultures and they offer this meaning back to the church. This the pattern of all genuine enculturation -- the missionary, and, through the evangelist, the whole church, discovers heretofore unnoticed or disclosed treasures of her own sacred heritage.

When Navajo Indians of the American southwest were asked to make a film about production of their famous rugs, they submitted a video depicting a sunrise, wild flowers blooming, rain falling, sheep grazing, wind blowing, the sun setting, and finally a few seconds showing a half-finished rug on a traditional loom. The producers who had commissioned the film were confused and disappointed. They had expected to see wool being spun, dyed and woven, and none of this was included in the video. But to the Navajo, it takes more than wool, vegetable dyes, a loom and a grandmother to make a rug. They assumed a much wider frame of reference: The sun must rise. The rain must fall. The flower must bloom. The sheep must graze. And if all is harmony, you can get rugs out of it. *It takes the whole cosmos to make a rug.*

Is this not equally true of our Eucharistic gifts? We so often perceive it as merely bread -- flour, water and yeast. But what does it take to produce that flour? The sun must shine. The wind must blow. The rain must fall. The earth must be fertile. Human beings must appropriately interact with it. And if all is in harmony, you can make bread. On every altar, in every church we offer the universe in joy and thanksgiving back to God. But our frame of reference can be too small.

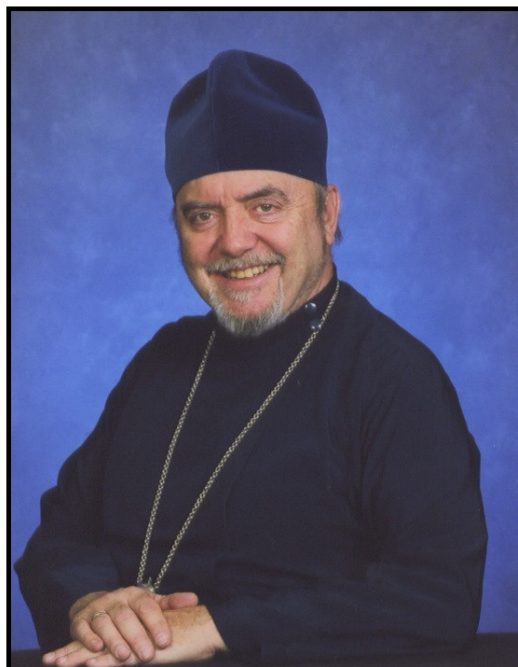
Christ fed thousands with only a few loaves and two fish. Those who witnessed this considered it a miracle. Our Lord also said, "The son only does the works he sees his Father do." The Father is always taking a little wheat and feeding thousands, but we fail to see it, we don't get the message. He is taking some seeds each spring and making food in every wheat and corn field, but the pagans said it was Apollo or Zeus or Minerva or "Mother Nature" at work, and secularists say it is all "natural processes." So the Son does the same thing he sees his Father do, but on a smaller scale and a faster speed, and suddenly the miraculous element becomes evident. It is the same Word of God made manifest and the feeding of the thousands will have its full impact when we can recognize it continuously in the miracle of the cosmos, the Word written in letters so large we could not read the message before.

By reminding the church of the cosmic dimensions of its faith and mission, the Greek evangelized become evangelists. In the Patristic age, Greek language, Greek culture, Greek philosophical language enriched the life of the church forever. As the seed, the gospel, the church, as Christ's presence enters into the context of other cultures, these too offer something back to God. The same seed, the same faith, the same Orthodox truth, implanted in another culture produces a unique harvest, a Serbian, a Romanian, a Russian, a Ukrainian, an Albanian, an African, an Alaskan, an Indonesian, a Korean or Japanese (or even an American), expression, each the product of the same holy faith, yet each irreplaceable and unique.

Father Alexander Schmemmann defined in his most famous book, *For the Life of the World*, what it means to be Christian. "A Christian," he wrote, "is someone who, wherever he/she looks sees Christ and rejoices Him." I read this book many times. I was blessed for several years to attend Father Alexander's lectures. I read Holy Fathers. But it was my Eskimo parishioners who revealed to me the depth of the passage, revealed to me the cosmic dimension of the prologue to the gospel according to St. John, showed me the magnificence of the Apostle Paul's Christocentric experience and vision. This is what enculturation means for the church. Unlike syncretism, which distorts the gospel, corrupts the faith, renders a Christian harvest impossible, enculturation enriches and deepens and expands the genuine apprehension of the Apostolic faith, to the glory of God and building up of his holy church. The church, while resisting any syncretism, delights and rejoices in enculturation.

Conclusion

The church scatters the seed, offering the gospel to all, and in so doing, discovers the new harvest dimensions of the faith it had not consciously known, noticed or appreciated fully before. Evangelism enriches the church. Enculturation blesses the church. Our Greek patristic legacy is the historic evidence of the creative process. The seed always needs soil in which to grow-the gospel always needs a culture in which to be planted, and the Holy Spirit produces various harvests in each culture and in each of us.



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