

“ I AM REJECTING NOTHING ” I FOUND IN ORTHODOX FAITH

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This reflection is excerpted from an essay published on the author’s blog *Nonidiomatic* in 2017, as he pondered his eventual departure from the Orthodox Church (www.davensati54.blogspot.com/2017/04/heretics-testament.html).

“Yet contemplation is not vision, because it sees ‘without seeing’ and knows ‘without knowing.’ It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words, or even in clear concepts. It can be suggested by words, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows, the contemplative mind takes back what it has said, and denies what it has affirmed. For in contemplation we know by ‘unknowing.’ Or, better, we know beyond all knowing or ‘unknowing.’”

—Thomas Merton,
New Seeds of Contemplation

“Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.”

—James Baldwin,
Notes of a Native Son

I have a story that I’ll try to tell here, in an effort to express where I find myself now in the Orthodox Church as I prepare to depart it. In doing this I’m coming out of the closet, so to speak, as one who may be considered heretical in thinking by fellow Orthodox Christians, but I’m also writing this in an effort to transmit as much of an idea as I can about where I’m at and how I got there, for anyone interested in hearing it.

I had a glimpse of something when I was a young man, several years before I came in contact with the Orthodox Church. Having had that experience, I wouldn’t have been able to set out on any spiritual or religious path that didn’t resonate in some way with it. Though my eventual decision to enter the Church was complicated in ways I didn’t completely understand back then as a naive young guy, beneath it all I had the impression that the Christ I met in Orthodoxy was compatible with that perception, as I’ll explain shortly.

The first time I wandered into an Orthodox church for the Divine Liturgy, it was a Sunday morning in Kodiak, Alaska, around 1974. I ended up spending the entire service standing by the door, not going in because it seemed to me I didn’t really belong there, but not

leaving because I was astonished by a sense of deep familiarity that hit me. This feeling was so striking that I found myself scanning my childhood memories in vain to try to come up with an explanation for it. That moment was the catalyst for my exploration of Orthodox Christianity. It overcame the mild aversion I'd had toward Christianity after a bad experience with evangelicalism in my teens and it also postponed further exploration of the Buddhist teachings to which I seemed naturally inclined.

There was so much to discover about the Orthodox faith beyond that first attraction, but what I was able to see in those early days, now forty years past, resonated with me so deeply that I was eventually inclined to join up. Had I been older and wiser at the time of the encounter, I might have waited a bit longer, but I was neither old nor wise. My decision was age- and intelligence-appropriate.

So, who was this Christ I took myself to have met there, and why did he seem to reveal himself to me in the Orthodox faith in a way he hadn't before, in the years of hearing so much about him that I'd gotten weary of it? It may have been simply that I was ready to see Christ this way, and that Orthodoxy provided the nudge, or maybe it's just because that's where I happened to be standing when the seeing began to happen. But I also got the feeling that something about the particular words and images employed in the Orthodox Church pointed to some truth about this Christ phenomenon in a way I hadn't seen elsewhere. The Orthodox proclivity for apophysis seemed to underscore the fact that the words and images were inadequate, and it seemed to me that that understanding is what freed them up to be so often extraordinarily beautiful and to ring so true. They were precious for what they guided you toward, but became something like false

when taken as ends in themselves. I've found this to be true of most words and images.

I'll avoid the language one is supposed to use in speaking of Christ such as I learned in books and seminary, and try to put it my own way: it seemed to me the words and images might point to that great reality beyond body and mind I'd gotten a glimpse of, expressed in a particular body and mind: the anointed one, Christ, someone who completely *was* that body-mind while at the same time transcending it, thus revealing the deep truth about both humanity and "God": that both are profoundly intimate with each other to the point of there being no separation. This perception pretty much flies in the face of the usual view of God as some entity separate from us to be mediated, to be reached out to, with the real intimacy relegated to maybe some point after death if we do the right things.

This perception of Christ didn't match the view I'd often encountered in Christianity, which, bluntly put, seemed to have something to do with a notion of God as a separately existing "being" who was believed to have occupied a human body for a lifetime a couple millennia ago, did some tricks to prove it was really him, and died as some sort of sacrifice (to himself?) to expiate his creation from the wrongs they'd done against him. But the death didn't really "take" or was just a temporary blip anyway, and in this act of death and resurrection he somehow "saved" from death and/or punishment those who either believed all that or who joined the institution (I apologize right now to my Christian friends whose theology that in no way represents, but I believe it does represent the ideas that live in the minds of a lot of Christians).

I never internalized the notion of Christ's death as atonement, but I did come to see

his death as overwhelmingly significant, as really the kernel of truth of that great revelation. It was a revelation of what the word *God* signified, related to my experience recounted above: the ultimate reality expressed through this human being's radical, self-emptying compassion, and it was the radical self-emptying that so forcefully bore witness to that greater reality he embodied. The transcendent reality expressed in human form (or a human fully embodying that transcendent reality) doesn't conquer a profligate creation to bring it under control, but empties himself completely on behalf of it, to the point of his own nonexistence. He faces the power play on which the world is revealed to run on every level, and *through* succumbing to it, triumphs over it. In doing so, he shows that such self-emptying is the only way the power play is ever triumphed over.

Thus, for me, the "magical" aspect of the resurrection as it was celebrated in the Church never resonated for me as much as the crucifixion, in which I saw the real triumph. Resurrection seemed to me *inherent* in crucifixion, inseparable from the self-emptying. Christ's self-emptying was in *itself* the triumph, and that would have been true whether there was a flashy literal resurrection following or not, or even if the whole event had gotten lost in history and had not become the source of a religion like it did. The resurrection, especially as folks got thrilled about it in the glory of Pascha, often seemed something intended to mitigate the radical self-emptying of the crucifixion or to make it go away, or to supply a reward (to God?) for bearing it. But it seemed to me that resurrection lived *within* that crucifixion—revealing that resurrection lives in every moment, in every act that goes against the grain of the power dynamic on which the world runs, in every act of self-sacrifice, even in every act of kindness no matter how small.

In each Sunday Matins service, we read one of eleven different post-resurrection accounts from the gospels in a cycle. That this is the only eleven-cycle I know of among our usual threes, sevens, eights, twelves, and forties may be a sign that this strange eleven-ness is calling our attention to the fact that the accounts don't completely match up. Those who came up with the canon of scriptures were of course aware of the discrepancies and didn't try to hide them. I liked this. To me it all seemed a sign that this resurrection wasn't something one could easily point at or define; a miracle one shouldn't make too much of in the face of the myriad miracles that surround us every moment.

Anyway, though this Christ was said to have been an actual historical figure, I found that whether that was literally true or not didn't matter much to me. An event from that long ago was largely an event of the imagination for me anyway, and whatever got preserved about it was likely pretty incomplete—subject to error, as the disagreeing Gospel accounts indicated, and likely added on to through the years in ways to skew the message, both innocently and less so. And the boundary between real and symbolic became muted for me at some point, as I saw that truth could live pretty well in either. And then the Christ who originally confronted me had a habit of disappearing before my eyes, as concepts about him were revealed to be just that, leaving me astonished with what remained, for what remained became further difficult to point to or express, as expressions about it tended to end in paradox.

I came into the Church having a lot to learn. An infinite amount, I reckon, as I took the Godward direction to be an eternal movement. Over the years, I came up against elements of the Orthodox faith that I was never able to reconcile in myself. But the discovery was a long

process. The irreconcilable differences dawned very slowly over time after a lot of trying to see through them. I think I had expected that odd feeling of simultaneous belonging and not-belonging that I had at the church door in Kodiak so many years ago to eventually move me securely toward the belonging end of the spectrum. That never happened.

The Buddhist teachings that were so attractive to me in my youth bloomed into actual practice around twenty-five years ago (how that happened is another story), with years spent finding the ways the two traditions seemed to be compatible and coming up against the ways they seemed not to be, finding that some of the differences began to seem insignificant while others remained irreconcilable. In practice I perceived no difference in my direction. I came to feel like someone naturally inclined toward the Buddhist teachings who'd gotten hijacked by Christ on the way. But this hijacking was no detour. I was only ever grateful for it. I got to experience Christ in a way that felt profoundly true, and this saved me from being the insufferable Buddhist convert I'm sure I would have been without it. This hijacking prevented me from clinging easily to an identity; it compelled me to hold the competing articulations without resolving everything about them, and to find there to be *happiness* in that not knowing. Truth in the paradox.

I grew into something of an oddball within the Church, even if that was pretty much a secret. Though, if my articulation of this can be taken as heretical, I believe there are plenty of other heretics in the church much like me, even if they haven't expressed it exactly this way. I feel resonances with the way I see things in the saints, from Isaac of Syria to Gregory Palamas to Mother Maria Skobtsova. I feel it in the theology, the hymnography, the iconography—even in some of the

dogmas promulgated by the councils, though only if one understands all of those expressions to be provisional in the face of a truth that can only be pointed toward. I also feel it in the miracle of every act of compassion that anyone does.

But over four decades I've watched the Orthodox Church set itself in a way that's becoming an ever more hostile environment for someone like me. The mini-flood of converts who've come into the Church in America in the past decades are often unrepentant evangelicals, incredibly imagining themselves to have discovered their roots here, and they bring with them the extremest expression of the bogus "salvation" I described above. I'm not saying such a view hasn't ever lived in our church, but lately it seems to be presented as what it's all about. And apart from the evangelicals there is another mini-flood of movement conservatives looking for the religious component of their conservatism and, also incredibly, finding it in Orthodoxy. This is true in the traditional Orthodox countries as well as in our cult-like little institution in America. The Orthodox faith becomes just another of the systems in which God is defined as something other than us, something to be mediated by some kind of authority in the face of which one's own experience shouldn't be trusted.

I find the Church headed in a way that braces itself against what transcends body-mind. Or that acknowledges it in a way that restricts the actual experience of that transcendence to a certain kind of spiritual professional, restricting the rest of us to the safety of intellect and emotion. I believe the insistence on God as the ultimate "other," safely describable by definitions, leads then to the false separation between *myself* and other. And I believe that separation is ultimately the

reason the Church finds itself braced against dialogue with the modern world on issues of the place of women, of sexuality, and of interaction with folks of good will of other faiths and of non-faith who surround us in this uniquely pluralistic modern world. The Orthodox Church seems to be setting itself up as the place where such challenges don't apply, a separatist community holding itself up as the standard against which a wayward world is to be measured. This separatism is the antithesis of my own experience of Christ. Separation creates an idol "Christ." I believe such separation is what evil is all about.

One might be inclined to think it best, in a situation where the Church has gone as off course as I believe it has today, to look to the many people who, through the years, have borne witness against the evil the Church has generally contained—sometimes even with their lives—throughout its checkered history, and to follow their example. But it's a different world today. A smaller one. Societies no longer find themselves in a homogenous religious institution, with other systems far enough away to be demonized. Religion is optional. Our various articulations of truth come up against each other and can't in honesty be ignored. In a world where one is confronted with profound truth of other kinds, one must either let one's own view be challenged or build a wall against the threat. Our church is becoming the refuge for those intent on building such a wall. It's becoming the religion where nothing ever changed or will. This is the foundation of our faith for so many these days, and it's a lie.

My own place inside the Orthodox Church makes it more difficult to remain than it does for some others who don't fit in. For one thing, based on what I've

described above, I'd likely be considered a heretic by most of those in our church who take themselves able to make such pronouncements. For another, I'm a gay man in a situation where there's a basic refusal even to discuss the issue of sexuality, and there are no signs that the discussion will be permitted, even as the world around us compels us to address it. I'm more weary of this than I can express. People who are presented as being on the progressive forefront of that issue or any other response to the modern world are pretty much at a point of timidly suggesting that it might be possible to begin a discussion, though probably not right now, and they're overpowered by a large and vocal group of people violently braced against the discussion and ready to attack anyone who brings it up. Add to this the fact that I haven't for quite a long time taken the Orthodox Church to contain all truth, or even to express what aspects of truth it does express flawlessly, and you'll see why I've often been asked quite reasonably what I'm still doing here.

Part of the reason is that I love the Church. Aspects of waking up have occurred for me in its context, particularly that meeting of Christ that set me out on this paradoxical journey. I love the path that's been there for me with fellow Christians, I love the hard and lovely practice of the long services. I love the tradition. I love our eloquent, imperfect verbal and visual articulations of truth. And forty years in this community have inclined me very slightly in the direction of becoming more honest and kind than I was at the outset. And even slightly is a big deal. Another reason is that I've ended up in one of the very rare parishes where someone like me can be tolerated or accepted. But this ends in cold comfort when I observe how hostile the environment is for folks like me in the majority

of situations, and I've observed so many gay people either marginalized, demonized, or simply cast out. I've observed people frustrated by denial of the gifts of women in the Church, even as those gifts begin to be acknowledged in the world just outside the church doors. And these issues that affect me directly are pretty much the tip of the iceberg. Every other issue affects me directly too.

I've become pessimistic about the situation improving. For quite a long time I've pondered whether the most honest response to this would be to remain in the Church, bearing witness to the truth I originally saw in it, to the point of sacrificing myself in some way if that ended up necessary. If I saw the Orthodox Church as the ultimate expression of truth, it would make good sense to me to do so, but I don't. And when I consider the bearing of witness that staying in the Church will continue to require, I realize that other bearings-of-witness in this world are of greater importance to me: everything from addressing poverty to working for peace and justice to the abolition of the prison-industrial system seem far more important to me than preserving the institutional Orthodox Church at this point.

My intention is to make a departure in the autumn of 2017, allowing myself most of the rest of this year to experience the cycle of services once more with the knowledge that it will soon be left behind. I will remain the same guy. I'm rejecting nothing I found in Orthodox faith. If I'm pressed to assign myself an identity, as one usually is, I'll maybe have to speak of myself as a Buddhist (for I will practice Zen) who was hijacked by Christ, the borders of whose identity will thus always remain embarrassingly indistinct.

The most painful aspect of this exit is the leaving behind people of goodwill within the Church, many of them family-like friends, with whom I feel a deep kinship and sense of direction related to all I've said above, even if they might regard aspects of my own thinking as heretical. Among them are people who have welcomed my participation or who would tolerate me there out of genuine love. Among them I especially acknowledge members of the clergy who haven't given up on bearing witness like I have. I honor their witness and hope that our spiritual siblinghood can be maintained. May I be wrong and may they be right about the future of the institution of the Orthodox Church. If I'm wrong in this decision, I ask you to give me credit for making it with at least an aspiration to honesty. For those I see entering the Church now as I leave, I wish you well, and I pray that you'll see the glory of Christ, paradoxical and ever-disappearing, and become through that experience more honest, wise, just, and kind. And that you'll also be kind to *me*, when it's revealed I've made the wrong decision and you've made the right one.

Through the years I've often felt that those of us celebrating the liturgy were doing it on behalf of everyone in the world. There's a mysterious way in which no being is excluded, whether they know anything about it or even care. Some years back I spent an exploratory few years away from the Church, and I saw things from the other side. What I found was that separation was in its own way a kind of participation. I was one of those on whose behalf it was being done, and I was grateful for it. I hope that I can continue to be grateful in that way, and I vow to dedicate my practice to my Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters all the rest of my life. ✽