

The Scandal of Now: Witnessing to Christ in Contemporary Western Societies

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“Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, on the shore of a great sea, there stood a mighty and wonderful city. In that city lived a great and pious king.” This is how many stories that we read to our children at bedtime begin. But this is also how we Orthodox often seem to define our Christian identity, by thinking in terms of “ancient faith,” “eternal tradition,” hagiographic stories written in the style of fairy tales, and, most importantly, by referencing our Christian witness to the times and circumstances of homicidal tyrants and spectacular martyrdoms. Partly, this is because most of us know that the word “witness” comes from the Greek *μάρτυρας*, and therefore “martyr” and “witness” are synonymous. But I dare say that our Orthodox Christian identity also has a lot to do with the romantic nature of our religious formation. Our history and our hymnody are replete with stories of martyrs withstanding torture and experiencing terrible death at the hands of cruel persecutors. Our earliest stories of the apostolic missions tell about the conversions of hundreds and thousands. And so we labor under the weight of imagery that is often superhuman and far removed from our daily existence. Even when we talk about recent history, we tell these stories in the language of antiquity,

so people who were contemporaries of our grandparents assume the stature of ancient heroes. We forget that everyday life is just that—everyday life, whether in the first century, the twelfth, or the twenty-first. It is here, now, in the twenty-first century, that we live, and it is in this time that we “have put on Christ” at our baptism.

The question of Christian identity and witness is the one that all of us wrestle with at various points in our lives, presuming that we are Christian not only in name and cultural background, but in trying, however imperfectly, to follow Christ. And the context of Western society presents a challenge to the notions of witness and martyrdom borne out of the heroic imagery of the past. We are challenged to understand what this witness means in an environment of general comfort and religious tolerance, in a culture that is neither adversarial to the Church nor embracing it. Yes, human life is long, and a wealthy socialite may end it in a gas chamber in Ravensbrück, and a Grand Duchess breathe her last at the bottom of a coal mine. However, while “few are chosen,” “many are called.” Discerning this call in the context of our everyday normalcy is where the struggle lies.

The author would like to thank her priest and teacher, Father Robert Arida.

"You shall bear witness to me," Christ tells his disciples in the first chapter of Acts, and this is where we somehow tend to stumble. He does not say "You will bear witness to *my teachings*" but "to *me*"—and this is what makes Christianity the end of all religion, as Father Alexander Schmemmann loved to say, except that Christians have done an excellent job of making it into religion. This fact in and of itself bears on our identity. We have transformed the Gospel into a complicated new law, weaving an elaborate web of canons and rubrics. And in doing so, we have built impenetrable walls around ourselves, brick by brick, so that the landscape of Christianity resembles a map of sixteenth-century Germany, with a myriad of principalities, duchies, bishoprics, and free cities. Within these walls, our religious identity is centered around a notion of otherness. The very term "orthodoxy" presumes that the "heterodox" are aliens, but this notion is not limited to doctrine and worship. It serves, by adherence to the letter of our new law, to separate the "chosen few" from the rest. Is this what was commanded to us by the one who, in his earthly ministry, broke every wall that his tribe and his religion held sacred and inviolate?

Lest you be alarmed that I am proposing some kind of radical abolition of Orthodoxy in favor of an all-embracing anarchy, I assure you that I have no such ambition. What concerns me regarding the question of contemporary Christian witness is the popular misunderstanding of what it means to be countercultural, what it means to set ourselves against the world. From the unfortunately named "Benedict Option," proposed by American convert Rod Dreher as a flight to the "modern desert" from the evils of an immoral society, to the less radical isolationism of ethnic enclaves, there

is an idea that the world lies in darkness and the faithful are to concern themselves with cultivating internal and institutional purity apart from that darkness. This is an approach to "religious life as the world in itself, existing apart from the secular world and its life," in which Christian mission is understood at best as presenting an ethical ideal autonomous from the person of Christ, and at worst as condemning a lapsed humanity.¹ As Dreher describes: "We are only trying to build a Christian way of life that stands as an island of sanctity and stability amid the high tide of liquid modernity."²

This approach is characterized, among other things, by a heightened sense of offense and by a proclivity to be scandalized by everything that falls outside the rigid confines of religious propriety. This offense is manifested in the boringly predictable diatribes about the "Decline of the West," "Civilization on Trial," and the like, and the ever-present appeal to "traditional values," a mysterious but universally comforting notion.³ The *consensus populi* within this mindset is that the West until recently was fully Christian, and that in modern times, it has rejected and forsaken its Christian foundation, and therefore the secular and religious worlds stand in opposition and Christianity is under threat. The most commonly cited examples of this threat are in the spheres of art and sexual relationships. Every piece of art that is not didactic or decorative is suspect, and so is every relationship that challenges the established norm.

The amusing aspect of this position is, of course, its utter disregard of the fact that it is as ancient as culture itself. Not just every epoch but every generation produces a litany of complaints about "ungodly" modern art and licentious

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2004), 12.

² Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 54.

³ Cf. Georges Florovsky, "Faith and Culture", in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky: Christianity and Culture* (Brookline: Nordland Publishing Company, 1974).

lifestyles, and appeals to some gold—and usually ancient—standard of morality, of “sanctity and stability.” The trouble is that this gold standard is invariably a set of behavioral rules, and as such presents a structure of coercion and reciprocity. It is what Saint Paul in his epistles calls “the yoke of the law,” because it leads and subjects human life, paradoxically, to sin.

In contrast, Christian witness is not and cannot be reduced to recitation of a set of rules, nor to an example of “proper” and “pious” living. When our hagiography presents images of saints who in their infancy refused their mothers’ breast on Wednesdays and Fridays, it offers an unrelatable icon of fictional piety. If holiness were in fact synonymous with proper behavior, then historical evidence would compel us to bid farewell to the overwhelming number of our most beloved saints, beginning with the apostles themselves.

We must instead remember that when the scriptures speak of witness, they literally speak of *eyewitness* to the very person of the incarnate God. As St. John Chrysostom emphasizes in his homilies on Acts, the credibility of the apostles is founded on their personal experience of Christ. When Christ speaks to the disciples, he says, “you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:27). John the Baptist says, “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34), and this assertion is repeated throughout the New Testament.

The notion of Christian witness is inseparable from the question of identity. Whereas the identity of a member of a group, be it a religion, a tribe, or a musical fan club, is based on one’s connection to the system of values of

that group, the identity of a Christian is rooted in the person of Christ by nature of the two greatest mysteries, our baptism into his death and resurrection—which is the putting on of Christ—and our Eucharistic partaking of his body and blood. And this is the identity of our *true* person, restored from the distortion of sin. When Saint Paul says, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), he does not mean that he has relinquished his individuality or personhood and turned into an automaton, simply a mouthpiece of Christ. On the contrary, Paul extols the recovery of his true identity, one that is based in Christ as the new Adam. He is no longer bound to the old Adam, who severed humanity’s bond with the Father. By surrendering his will to Christ, Paul recovers the freedom of being a child of God, a freedom that was his from the beginning. This too is our birthright, which was forsaken by Adam in the garden for a lie, by which he was promised something *more* than the world that was given to him, and which was recovered by Christ through the sacrifice of his very life.

And this is where the essence of the Christian witness rests. Witnessing to Christ is only possible through *being*, because words alone, no matter how right, cannot live without the person. Words become alive when they carry the spirit of the one who speaks them. Without that, they are but noise: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” (1 Cor. 13:1–3)

In the series of talks on the Beatitudes, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann shows that in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ essentially witnesses to himself. The Beatitudes describe the new Adam, who from all eternity is new life. In that new life, humans regain a proper relationship with the world, the power to “make all things new,” to turn water into wine, to restore wholeness from corruption, to turn sorrow into joy. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11).

In America in the 1990s, a number of Christian youth groups adopted the motto “What Would Jesus Do?” as a moral imperative to act in a manner that would demonstrate the love of Christ through the actions of his followers. The phrase itself comes from *The Imitation of Christ*, written by Thomas à Kempis in the fifteenth century, and can serve as a key ascetical exercise. For the question would require every one of us to examine ourself through the experience of Christ as a person. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote: “If someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.”⁴ He is not suggesting some kind of frivolous relativism. Rather, he reminds us that the *person* of Christ is the ultimate truth, because he is the ultimate love—love that surpasses our limited understanding of justice and fairness.

The challenge of witnessing to Christ is therefore the challenge of *being* Christ to the other, and that challenge exists in a time of peace and comfort just as much as in a time of calamity and persecution. We cannot be witnesses to Christ by approaching the other from the elevated position of set expectations. Neither can we be witnesses if we operate within the worldly system of reciprocity, the

“Golden Rule.” Being “in the world but not of the world” requires approaching the world and culture in what really is a radical, countercultural way, challenging the normal tenets of human relationships with the impossible commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

The Scandal of Now

Perhaps the reason we tend to think of the Christian witness in the context of stories of extreme trials and persecutions is because in those times, things appear very clear. When there is an identified external threat, there is also clarity of response. Certainly sacrificing one’s life, freedom, even career is not at all easy, but there is at least a clear delineation of black and white, good and evil. It is so much harder to understand the place of witness in an environment such as we enjoy in the West. Most of us live in generally peaceful societies that for the time being strive for justice and fairness, and that are largely indifferent, even if respectfully indifferent, to the Church, having relegated it to the sphere of private pursuits.

This situation constitutes a great temptation for the Orthodox, for we are accustomed to identify ourselves as either belonging to a powerful institution or struggling for survival under oppression and persecution. Being neither in power nor under duress presents, as it were, a kind of offense. We take it for granted that the “message of the church”, however we may understand it, is an institutional message, and that it is either heeded or hated. Respectful indifference is, historically speaking, a fairly novel problem.

And perhaps that is why, when we think of Saint Paul’s words, “we preach Christ

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, Letter To Mme. N. D. Fonvisin, 1854, published in *Letters of Fyodor Michailovich Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, trans. Ethel Golburn Mayne (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 68.

crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23), we think of the Jews and Gentiles as "the others," the ones who stand opposed to us Orthodox. We forget that Paul was "of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless" (Phil. 3:5-6). When Paul speaks of his experience of Christ, he speaks as someone who was brought by that experience to understand that one follows and "puts on" Christ the Person, rather than Christian teaching. This is, incidentally, why it is a great offense to Paul to present him as a systematic theologian, and to generate a new law, as enslaving as the old, based on his writings. For how can one who wrote these words be placed on a Procrustean bed of rules and regulations?

Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness, fading as this was, will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor? For if there was splendor in the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness must far exceed it in splendor. Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all, because of the splendor that surpasses it. For if what faded away came with splendor, what is permanent must have much more splendor. Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through

Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:7-18)

Dostoevsky, by juxtaposing the person of Christ with the notion of truth, witnesses to the greatest struggle that every one of us has to fight with ourselves. Religious upbringing tends to teach us that every question or challenge has an answer within the tradition of our faith. But we misunderstand what that means. When faced with the strange, the uncomfortable, the painful, we are often too quick to retreat into the safety of the formulae that we are accustomed to take for granted without pausing to consider Paul's warning, "[God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). This is why, in a time of peace and comfort, we cannot dwell in the illusion of an "unchanging tradition" that is so often preached by the fundamentalists in the church. Rather, we should always remember that God is uncircumscribable, and therefore resists our institutional attempts to reduce him to the ethical notions of the limited human mind.

In his essay "Never Changing Gospel, Ever Changing Culture," Father Robert Arida writes:

For the Church to proclaim the never changing Christ as it meets the many and complex challenges of our time there must be a desire

on the part of all the faithful—bishops, priests, and laity—to allow the mind and heart to change and expand. This is nothing less than the ongoing process of repentance so as to encounter and engage ever more deeply the unchanging Christ. *To preach the never changing Christ requires us to be ever changing.* Our relationship with Christ, our relationship with each other and with our surroundings is a dynamic process that never ceases. This dynamism characterizes holiness given that our relationship with God and one another is always changing—always expanding. *“And we all, with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from glory to glory, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”* (2 Cor. 3:18) Without this “ascent,” without repentance (the changing of the mind) that expands the heart our faith, our Church and our Lord become dead idols bound only to the past.⁵

If we are indeed to engage the contemporary world and contemporary culture as ministers of Christ, there is no other way than to take the words of Saint Paul about dying to ourselves so that we may live in Christ literally. We have, of course, scores of glorious examples set before us by the history of Christianity. What unites those saints is that they respond to Christ with a joyful effort to *be* Christ-like in all things, to those they encounter and to their culture.

This joy comes from the awesome experience of discovering and encountering Christ in his creation and his creatures when one turns to them with an open mind and heart. Mother Maria Skobtsova, one of the greatest Christian witnesses of our time, said,

If someone turns with his spiritual world toward the spiritual world of another person, he encounters an awesome and inspiring mystery. . . . He comes into contact with the true image of God in man, with the very icon of God incarnate in the world, with a reflection of the mystery of God’s incarnation and divine manhood. And he needs to accept this awesome revelation of God unconditionally, to venerate the image of God in his brother. Only when he senses, perceives and understands it will yet another mystery be revealed to him—one that will demand his most dedicated efforts. . . . He will perceive that the divine image is veiled, distorted and disfigured by the power of evil. . . . And he will want to engage in battle with the devil for the sake of the divine image.⁶

To be a witness to Christ, to recover the image of Christ in oneself, is the only way to recover one’s true identity. Dostoevsky writes: “Since the appearance of Christ as *the ideal of man in the flesh*, it has become as clear as day that the highest final development of the personality must arrive at this (at the very end of the development, the final attainment of the goal): that man finds, knows, and is convinced, with the full force of his nature, that the highest use a man can make of his personality, of the full development of his *Ego*—is, as it were, to annihilate that *Ego*, to give it totally and to everyone undividedly and unselfishly.”⁷ It is worth noting here that this ultimate development is dynamic. To destroy the self in order to recover the self is a never-ending process, as God intended from all eternity.

Yet another challenge that our multifaceted, multicultural, multifaith Western society presents to Christian witness is

⁵ Robert Arida, “Never Changing Gospel, Ever Changing Culture” (2014), Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5357de0fe4b0191d0dc8cf13/t/5808a7e1414fb57387f9b966/1476962273750/Never+Chang+Gospel.pdf>.

that of pluralism. The late sociologist of religion Peter Berger, in the last years of his life, wrote extensively about the phenomenon of secularism, which led not to the decline of religion, as he had previously argued, but to a plurality of faiths and beliefs. This plurality is extremely difficult for the Orthodox to contend with. We are too used historically to being the only show in town and to squashing any competition, aided by the power of the monarch or the state. And what happens too often in this pluralistic context is that the Orthodox end up aligning themselves with a political “gospel,” replacing Christ with political programs. There is too much preaching of politics from the ambo in Western churches, too much instructing parishioners how to vote in local elections, too much attention by our hierarchs to the political winds of the day. Yet this, again, is nothing new. In fact, it appears in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians: “Each one of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ’” (1 Cor. 1:12). To witness to these different “gospels,” even if they are delivered in pious trappings complete with scriptural references, is to end up with—to paraphrase the words of the great American writer Flannery O’Connor—“the gospel of Jesus Christ without Jesus Christ.” This witness may bring people to the church perceived as a community united around a common “set of values,” but it will not bring them to Christ any more than a righteous following of the rubrics would, since Christ is neither values nor rubrics.

I believe that the thing that one discovers when trying to follow Christ is that the way is invariably the way of the cross. It is the way of the cross because following Christ, we always come up against the law, and this happens in the Church just as much as it happens outside it. Sadly, in the West, it happens in the Church more than we may want to believe, since our secular culture has for decades been trying to cultivate openness to and acceptance of the very challenges that the Church has great difficulty processing, and feels obligated to condemn for fear of error. Among them are challenges related to advances in science and technology, the beginning and end of human life, anthropological issues of gender and sexuality (including the place of women in the Church and the composition of the family), stewardship of the environment, the death penalty, and the morality of war. Being countercultural in responding to these challenges leads to the cross, just as it led Christ when he opposed the ideologies of the scribes and Pharisees. That there are scribes and Pharisees in the Church today makes for an awful and deeply frightening predicament. It is the fear that paralyzes our witness more surely than any other fear. Yet in assuming this stance we also have the opportunity to discover the joy of the other, and the joy of seeing the world as it should be of being truly in communion with it, rather than standing in judgment, which divides and separates. *

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⁶ Saint Maria (Skobtsova) quoted in Sergei Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova, 1891–1945* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1981), 13.

⁷ Fyodor Dostoevsky, notebook entry for April 16/28, 1864, quoted in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 298–9.



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