

What Evangelicals should know about Negrut's assessment of Eastern Orthodoxy

by Joel Kalvesmaki

With the growing number of converts to Orthodox Christianity from their own ranks, Evangelicals have begun to publish to stave off the growing success of a Christian tradition that, until recently, has generally been unknown. As part of their contribution to circling the wagons, the *Christian Research Journal* (Winter 1998) published an article, "Searching For the True Apostolic Church: What Evangelicals Should Know About Eastern Orthodoxy,"¹ written by Dr. Paul Negrut, professor of theology in Oradea, Romania.

This article is not the best Protestant critiques of Orthodoxy. Far better are those by Daniel Clendenin and by Protestant theologians of the Orthodox and Reformed Consultations. But because Negrut's article has quite a high profile on the Internet, I would like to offer a few critical thoughts. What follows is written tersely, meant to be only fully intelligible to someone who has read the article.

Negrut first challenges the claim of the Orthodox Church to be universal and unified. In doing so, however, he conflates the various Eastern communions and treats them as a whole, committing the error of equivocation by using the analysis of Eastern *Christendom* as a critique for the Eastern Orthodox Church (EOC). While it is true that the ecclesiastical structures of the EOC, Oriental Orthodox Church, Church of the East, and Uniate Orthodox Churches are distinct from one another, this says nothing about the unity of the EOC. An analogous argument, closely following Negrut's own wording, would be the following:

"The presupposition behind the claim that the Lutheran Church is one single body with one voice is fallacious. Protestantism is not a monolithic bloc that shares a unified tradition and church life. In a broad sense, the Protestant tradition comprises all Christian churches that separated from Rome in the 16th century in order to follow one of their various leaders. The churches all have significant theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural differences among themselves. For example, the 16th century controversy over whether the Eucharist has the real presence of Christ or not separated the Lutheran church from the Calvinist churches. Furthermore, the Protestant churches disagree on church government and sacraments. Hence, the Protestants have parallel ecclesiastical structures even in the same city, clearly contradicting their claim to be unified."

If this argument is absurd, then so is the one offered by Negrut. He makes the same errors in classification and judgment. Just as the Lutheran Church is a proper subset of Protestantism, so the Eastern Orthodox Church is a proper subset of eastern Christendom. If it is unfair to speak of Protestant churches leaving Catholicism to "join their leaders," how much more so in the case of the EOC. And nowhere does this argument acknowledge the unity of Lutheranism, a disservice similar to the one Negrut gives the EOC. That is to say, Negrut claims to show that the EOC is disunited, but has simply shown the obvious, that it is at odds with other eastern churches. If Negrut still holds to his argument, but rejects this one, then he must show wherein the disanalogy lies.

1 <http://www.equip.org/free/DE177.htm>

The EOC admittedly has administrative conflicts. In Western countries there are Orthodox jurisdictions that run parallel to one another along ethnic lines. How did this come about? The answer, in brief, is "happenstance." In overlapping waves, immigrants arrived in the West and from their new home established ties with the Churches in their motherland, which then developed into the different jurisdictions currently found in Europe and America. The justification for this situation? None. We Orthodox are in the middle of a lengthy process to straighten out this matter. Here in the US, this process of unity is progressing under SCOBA (Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America), the standing body of Orthodox bishops in America. We recognize an administrative "disunity" but this is more apparent than real. We partake of one eucharist, the genuine token of unity.

The title of Negrut's section, "Orthodox faith or faiths?" leads the reader to expect a demonstration of theological rifts within the EOC. He does not provide this. Rather he infers that Orthodox are internally divided simply because the EOC consists of many diverse cultures. But how can this be true? Are we to believe that Evangelicals are also divided amongst themselves, simply because they have many cultural and ethnic identities? Are we to believe that *any* group, once it crosses a line of ethnicity, is somehow internally divided? Matters are not looked at this way in the EOC. The ethnocentricity that Negrut rightly criticizes does not affect our unity in the faith. The Orthodox Church, regardless of which culture you pick, holds to the same beliefs and dogmas. There always have been and there will continue to be the inclusion of new ethnic identities within the EOC, very much to the contrary of Negrut's rather silly statement, "one cannot become Orthodox in general."

Neither on the basis of ethnic identity nor in the jurisdictional conflicts has Negrut sufficiently challenged the EOC's claim to be unified and universal. This is not to say that there are no differences of opinion or raging theological debates in Orthodoxy. But he did not pick the right ones. He should have looked at something more familiar to Orthodox Christians such as the Revised Julian versus the Julian calendar, or the role of the EOC in ecumenical dialogue.

In the following section, Negrut suggests that because the EOC changed in time, the Apostolic Tradition was also distorted. This argument, however, leads to absurd consequences.

Investigating the history of any group of people, without respect to age or culture, we discover elements that change and elements that do not. But what does change in a group or individual mean? As an individual I am constantly under change, yet I would still like to say that I am the same person, whether at age one or fifty. The human body is said to replace all of its cells every seven years. Does that mean that I am somehow a different individual every seven years? A person's interests, job, family, friendships, and so forth can change just as frequently. Does this mean that someone becomes a completely different individual after a certain number of such changes?

The Orthodox do not claim that there has been *no* change in our history, but simply that there has been no *essential* change. Another way to put it: what changes have occurred have been not affected the Apostolic Tradition. The Orthodox authors Negrut quotes, I believe, would agree with this. There is a core Tradition that is kept intact in the larger life of the Church. Negrut does not attempt to show how the EOC has deviated from Tradition by documenting the

vagaries of certain dogmas. Rather he construes Orthodox theologians as being at odds with one another.

Negrut further claims that a chasm exists within the EOC between the "two-source" approach, represented by Archbishop Michael, a 1962 almanac of the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, and C. Konstantinidis; and the "one-source" approach, represented by the 1976 Moscow Agreed Statement, Bp. Kallistos Ware, and E. Clapsis.

Although Negrut construes Konstantinidis and Archbishop Michael as being incompatible with the Moscow Agreed Statement and Clapsis, it pays to read quotes again. They are completely compatible. The one area where they seem to conflict is in Konstantinidis' quote, ". . . we Orthodox consider Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition as two sources of revelation of equal weight and authority, as two equivalent sources of dogma and of supernatural faith." Compare this with the Moscow Statement: "Any disjunction between Scripture and Tradition such as would treat them as two separate 'sources of revelation' must be rejected. The two are correlative. . . ." Note that Konstantinidis does not say that the sources are separate, nor does he specify what he means by "source." The ambiguities in this term are very important since it is possible to speak of "source" as either intermediary or terminal, just as it was possible for Aristotle to speak of "cause" in four different ways. Note also that the Moscow Statement does not condemn the distinction (since it goes on to *use* the distinction) but the separation (I would assume here, a separation *qua* essence). I am certain that with a closer reading of Konstantinidis (who is neither a Father nor a Doctor of our Church), Negrut might actually see that our theologians can be reconciled in their view of Scripture and Tradition.

Interestingly, Negrut describes the two-source theory as dominant "since the Middle Ages" and the one-source theory dominant amongst ecumenical participants (29). Supposing that his distinction is true (which it isn't), that accounts for only the last several centuries. Were there no theories between the first and twelfth centuries? Where is he getting this historical information? Furthermore, how did Trent, a Roman Catholic council, influence the two-source approach within the *Orthodox* Church? One suspects that Negrut is here superimposing a Protestant argument against Catholics.

In fact, Negrut's article may be one of the first to allege that Orthodox theology is stricken by this debate. There are no articles written by Orthodox theologians arguing for a one-source or two-source approach to authority. In fact in each of the various standard introductory works on the EOC—*Orthodox Way*, *Byzantine Theology*, *Mystical Theology*, books that Negrut quotes—there is no reference to such a debate. This should be no surprise to those who are better read, since the issue is really quite irrelevant in the larger framework of Orthodox theology.

Negrut turns to the question of the consistency of the teaching of the EOC. He correctly states that the infallibility of the Orthodox Church should guarantee the consistency and coherence of her teachings. He proposes to show that the EOC is fallible by demonstrating that their doctrines are inconsistent or incoherent. In the section entitled, "The Content of Tradition," he shows that Orthodox theologians fail to agree on the content of tradition. But what does this have to do with his original claim? Even if it is true that certain Orthodox theologians fail to agree on the content of their tradition, how does this show that the doctrines of the EOC are inconsistent or incoherent? Orthodox theology transcends any single teacher.

Negrut even fails to show that the criteria used by Konstantinidis, Archbishop Michael, Ware, and Clapsis are incompatible. Strangely, our author seems to completely miss the point that all four positions are mutually compatible. Rather than painstakingly demonstrate this, I would suggest the reader spend time researching the sources Negrut quotes. For instance, Abp. Michael's citation of the Fathers and the seven Ecumenical Councils *alone* entails all five of Konstantinidis' points. This correspondence, however, is obscured by the double non-sequitur in Negrut's analysis of Abp. Michael's position. On the one hand he asserts that Abp. Michael's failure to name the local councils and Fathers makes a distinction between "Apostolic" and "ecclesiastical" impossible; on the other hand, failure to clarify these councils and Fathers puts the EOC in danger of equating the Scriptures with other teachings and practices, and giving Apostolic authority to non-Apostolic teachings. In the first case, why should the incompleteness of one author determine the competence of an entire body? In the second, why should imprecision entail instability? If philosophers fail to clarify who belongs to the "canon" of philosophers, do they run the danger of going off in their discipline? Even *if* philosophers were in such "danger," how can we say that imprecision was the cause? In both cases, it is unclear why the conclusion follows from the premise.

In the rest of his article (from p. 31), Negrut refutes his claim that there is no agreement amongst Orthodox theologians, as he posits arguments that assume knowledge of what the core of the Orthodox Tradition is. So we are led to believe that not only is the EOC in a sad state of disarray, but Negrut can bring order out of our chaos. What we have failed to accomplish, Negrut will provide, and refute! But if this is not what he intends or means, and if he truly believes that there is no consensus as to the content of Tradition, then he should have ended the article there.

Fears of Negrut's privileged vantage point vanish at the first paragraph of the section, "East and West: Two Approaches to Theology." He claims that the "Western theological paradigm is creation-fall-redemption, while the Eastern is creation-deification, or theosis." (31) Why, then, does he spend half of page 33 dealing with the Eastern paradigm of creation-fall-redemption? Furthermore, it is unclear what Negrut means by "theological paradigm," although it seems that what he means is "theology of the atonement" or "soteriology." This makes his position all the more problematic since the Orthodox understanding of the atonement is multi-faceted and wide-ranging. It cannot be reduced to a single formula. We include within our liturgical material a host of various analogies that preserve the diversity taught by the ancient Fathers concerning the atonement. It is too bad that Negrut did not take the opportunity to explain how richly diverse Orthodox soteriology is, but chose to create another artificial distinction and pursue an isolated strain of Orthodox thought.

Negrut explains the way of Orthodox theology in terms calculated to reinforce the sympathetic Protestant bias of his readers. Bolstered by Timiadis's statement that union with God occurs "in the absence of all intellectual knowledge," he inaccurately depicts Orthodox theology as anti-intellectual. Negrut fails to report that the citation itself is drawn from a treatise that is not anti-intellectual. Timiadis's article addresses Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants who may embrace the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, which asserts that God is known by drawing analogies from creation. Timiadis's merely wants to argue against those who would attempt to know God via the intellect. This is not anti-intellectualism. It is the recognition that the intellect has a limited function when it comes to know God. Furthermore, in choosing to focus on a single modern

theologian, Negrut has not dealt with the many, many Fathers and theologians who affirm the goodness of the intellect. As a result of his oversight, he has failed to convey a very important point we Orthodox would want to make, in concord with many Evangelicals, that the intellect has little ultimate bearing upon our knowledge and experience of God. Some of the greatest scoundrels and heretics in history have been geniuses. Yet some of the wisest saints have been unlearned and ignorant. God is known not by *scientia*, but by *sapientia*. *Sapientia* is higher than, but not contradictory to *scientia*.

Negrut continues and claims that Orthodoxy teaches a "minimalist view of sin," that it wholly distinguishes between the incarnation and atonement (as if the Incarnation were not an act *of* the Atonement!), and that it gives different accounts of the sacraments, all of which he describes as "discrepancies." Each of these three claims can be easily dispelled if someone takes time to study Orthodox theology further. The liturgical hymns, for instance, dispel any notion of a "minimalist" view of sin, since they contain some of the most profound meditations on personal sinfulness. Teaching on the Incarnation and Atonement are well-worn themes in Orthodox literature ever since, if not before, the classic of St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*. "Discrepancies" in Orthodox teaching on the sacraments must be taken with the same grain of salt as the "discrepancies" in the "sources" of Tradition: various expressions of the sacraments may differ but they need not contradict one another.

In conclusion, Negrut introduces new claims for which he badly argues, if he bothers. He claims, for instance, that Orthodox Christianity places "the divine Persons into a kind of intermediary level between essence and energies," citing his own article, but offering no further reason for us to believe that this is the case. Such a statement shows an appalling lack of familiarity with Trinitarian theology with respect to essence and energies, such as found in St. Gregory Palamas's *Triads*. Negrut's unfamiliarity with Orthodox theology is further reinforced when he denies that the Son or Holy Spirit are essential in our account of union with God. As proof he cites Timiadis. But Timiadis argues for the opposite: our theology of essences and energies is anything *but* impersonal.

In summary Negrut claims that the famous convert to Orthodoxy, Gillquist, clearly has no understanding of the Orthodox faith. Yet he has not even begun to show *what* Gillquist understands about Orthodoxy. The *most* Negrut can claim, with any measure of possible justification, is that Gillquist's claim, that the EOC accurately preserves the faith and life of the New Testament, is false. He shows nothing about how *complete* Gillquist's understanding is.

This is a bad article. Negrut makes several historical errors, such as citing St. Irenaeus as a third century father, or claiming that St. Dionysius the Areopagite was "the father of the negative way" (as if there was no apophaticism in Clement of Alexandria). These errors merely decorate the larger structural fissures. Negrut has not only failed to properly engage with Orthodox thought and theology, but a wonderful opportunity has been lost to promote understanding and reconciliation between Evangelical and Orthodox believers.

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