**Developing Awareness of the other Tradition: an Evangelical Perspective**

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" All generalizations are false, including this one." Mark Twain[[1]](#footnote-1)

Mark Twain's warning applies to making general theological statements about complex issues. I find that generalizations are not only a temptation but also the practice when encountering adherents of our different traditions. The tendency to generalize belief and behavior, usually in a negative manner, obscures the opportunity not only to learn from one another but also to discover areas of cooperation. .

Why is this the case? I would like to organize our reflection under three headings.

*I. Ignorance*

1. Historical ignorance- basically we Evangelicals don't know Orthodox History. A survey of church histories on my bookshelf demonstrates the relative lack of attention to the Eastern Churches. The church history that was the textbook when I was a seminary student hardly mentioned the Orthodox Church.[[2]](#footnote-2) Admittedly that was many years ago and perhaps students today use better textbooks. My survey of a half dozen books indicates that while some histories have discussions of the Eastern Churches, the coverage is still limited.[[3]](#footnote-3) Generally the different trajectories of the East and West meant that most histories only commented on the Eastern Church when there was interaction with the West. For example, there might be coverage of the Council of Florence (1438-1439) where the Emperor attempted to promote Church union between Rome and Constantinople to secure military aid against the Turks.

In defense of Church History lecturers, there is not enough time allotted in the theological curriculum to history to allow for more than a cursory examination of all but the main players, especially those who influenced one's own denomination.[[4]](#footnote-4) History suffers at the hands of more practical disciplines that are needed for pastoral formation.[[5]](#footnote-5) Scanning M. Div. curriculums in both traditions, we see this is a problem also present in Orthodox seminaries.[[6]](#footnote-6)

2. Theological ignorance- While it is tempting to suggest that some evangelicals don't know their own theological tradition, many also remain ignorant of the themes of Eastern Christian Theology. I have seen in print misunderstanding about the Orthodox concept of sin, justification and sanctification.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*II. Insecurity*

Basically there are two kinds. One is the insecurity of feeling that if the other person is right, then I must be wrong. We are thinking in dualistic terms when we should be thinking in Biblical terms which allow for deeper understanding and nuance. Especially in the West, we tend to latch onto a Biblical idea, make it the center of our theology and allow it to drive the rest of our theological understanding. We should rather accept the concept of mystery to help moderate our rationalism. The other insecurity stems from a sense of competition between traditions, fostered by aggressive evangelization by both Evangelicals and Orthodox. It is understandable and even admirable for us to want individuals to experience the fullness of life in Christ. But our fear of losing actual or potential adherents to our position causes us to absolutize our tradition and, at times, to demonize the other tradition.

It is my opinion, founded on observation, albeit limited, that some individuals thrive in one tradition and starve spiritually in the other. In the search for authenticity and meaningful worship, some find that Eastern Orthodoxy meets those needs while others find what they are looking for in one of the Evangelical traditions. Can we accept this or are we driven to prove, like the Pharisees whom Jesus condemned, that all converts must become like us? (Matt. 23:15)

*III. Intransigence[[8]](#footnote-8)*

I include this because 1) I want to have three points, 2) I like alliteration and 3) I want to point out that some of the difficulty between our respective traditions comes from our unwillingness to consider the other tradition might have something of value to show us. This intransigence can be an "all or nothing" attitude that doesn't consider learning from another Christian tradition. I believe I am speaking to a group who wants to learn from each other.

I am not promoting interreligious dialogue with other faiths, for example Islam. What I am advocating is the willingness to examine the Bible from the different perspectives held by recognized Church Fathers. Chrysostom and Augustine, both interpreters of Paul, found different but complementary insights in his writings. Evangelicals have normalized certain hermeneutical traditions and elevated these to doctrine. Our interpretation restricts our ability to see Scripture through a different lens.

Will reading Scripture through an Eastern lens lead to doctrinal confusion? Our human limitations and cultural contexts dictate our theology. We might agree on the basic doctrines of the faith; the Trinity and the redemption accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ, but part company on ways of church order, eschatology and worship.

God accommodates Himself to us. Calvin, speaking about how God dealt with the people of the Old Covenant and how He deals with the New Covenant in Christ, says:

Thus, God's constancy shine forth in the fact that He taught the same doctrine to all ages, and has continued to require the same worship of His name that He enjoined from the beginning. In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, He does not show himself subject to change. Rather, he has accommodated Himself to men's capacity, which is varied and changeable. Institutes I.2.13 (Battles translation)

In discussing the principles of Patristic Exegesis, John Breck, sometime professor at both St. Vladimir's Seminary and St. Sergius Theological Institute, makes a very important point, all too often forgotten by both Orthodox and Evangelicals. "As a *theandric* or divine human reality, Scripture contains elements that are historically, culturally and linguistically conditioned. Consequently, it must be reinterpreted in every new generation of the Church's life, under the inspirational guidance of the Holy Spirit."[[9]](#footnote-9)

One example of what Fr. Breck is speaking about can be found in an essay by George Demacopoulos in which he suggests updating the language of the Greek liturgy.

Given the Church’s historical practice of employing indigenous languages, given the fact that the majority of young Orthodox in the GOA do not know Greek, given that fluent Greek speakers struggle with Liturgical Greek, and given that our young people are leaving the Church in droves, it is time that our hierarchs, priests, and lay leaders take a hard look at the continued relevance of Liturgical Greek.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Symeon the New Theologian is clear about the role of the Holy Spirit in opening up the Scriptures.

How then will those who claim that they have never known at all the Holy Spirit's presence, radiance, illumination, and His coming to dwell in them have the power to know or perceive of think of them in any way? How shall they apprehend such mysteries, who have never at all experienced in themselves the recasting, renewal, transformation, reshaping, regeneration, that He brings about? ... Those who have not been "Born from above" (Jn. 3:3), how shall they see the glory of those who have been "born from above", ... tell me, what knowledge will enable them to understand or in any way imagine what the others have become?[[11]](#footnote-11)

Are we, in each of our traditions, in danger of quenching the Holy Spirit? (I Thessalonians 5:19)[[12]](#footnote-12) Each tradition leaves room for the miraculous. While we can agree on healing as a sign of God's work, we would disagree if the attribution was, at least in popular thought, to the intercession of a saint. Many Evangelicals might find physical miracles such as the Holy Fire and weeping icons difficult to accept.[[13]](#footnote-13) Could it be that God would use weeping icons to draw the faithful to a deeper understanding of His reality? Likewise, some of our Evangelical traditions practice prayer for healing and claim supernatural results.[[14]](#footnote-14) Can we be open to understanding that God can choose to act as He wills and choose instruments that might offend or disturb us to accomplish His stated purpose, i.e. that "God our Savior ... wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth." I Tim. 2:3

1. Read more at: https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/marktwain137872.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Williston Walker, ***A History of the Christian Church***, revised ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The best coverage is found in edited volumes with multiple contributors. E.g., ***The Oxford History of Christianity,*** ed. by John McManners, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Even then, only two chapters with a total 68 pages deal with the Eastern Church out of 684 pages. ***A World History of Christianity,*** ed. by Adrian Hastings, (London: Cassell, 1999) has two chapters with a total of 90 pages out of 536. David Chidester, ***Christianity: A Global History,*** (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000) has 17 pages. ***Introduction to the History of Christianity,*** ed. by Tim Dowley, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) has 12 pages. Bruce L. Shelley, ***Church History in Plain Language,*** (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), has 10 pages out of 495 pages. Paul Johnson, ***A History of Christianity,*** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976) mentions the East in *passim.* The same can be said for Martin E. Marty, ***A Short History of Christianity,*** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) where he only mentions the Orthodox Church in the modern period. But then, it is a short history. The older work of Johann August Wilhelm Neander, ***General History of the Christian Religion and Church***deals mostly with individuals and controversies, which is typical of how history was written. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We barely have time in our survey courses to teach about our founders, let alone engage in theological discussions about key figures in other traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. When asked in a survey about subject matter that pastors wished they had had in seminary, "administration" and "spirituality" topped their list. The M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust Review of Graduate Theological Education approximately 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A examination of the Holy Cross School of Theology catalogue demonstrates that the history course teaches the history of the Eastern Churches. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I have read some inaccurate things, including some who suggest that the Orthodox don't have a doctrine of sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Characterized by refusal to compromise or to abandon an often extreme position or attitude **:** [uncompromising](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/uncompromising) = intransigent in their opposition an intransigent attitude [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Breck, ***Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church***, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p.45. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. George Demacopoulos, "Is it time to Relinquish Liturgical Greek?" https://publicorthodoxy.org/2016/12/12/relinquishing-liturgical-greek [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ***Symeon The New Theologian: The Discourses***, trans. by C.J. deCatanzaro, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) p.264. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. NASV, the NIV translates this verse as "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." Which is precisely what I think we do at times because we are afraid of the Spirit's fire. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Haris Skarlakidis, ***Holy Fire: The Miracle of Holy Saturday at the Tomb of Christ, Forty-Five Historical Accounts (9th-16th c.,*** (Athens: Elaia Editions, 2011). "Each year, at noon on Holy Saturday, a light descends on the Tomb of Christ, the Holy Sepulchre, and ignites the so-called ever-burning oil lamp in the Tomb's interior, while at the same time a blue incandescence from the same light diffuses spontaneously igniting other lamps and candles around the church. This event has been recorded for at least twelve centuries." p. 11. As Fr. Paul O’Callaghan explains: "Tears are piv­otally associated in the tradition of the Church with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Those who strive for perfect prayer recognize genuine tears of com­punction (not emotional tears) as a great gift of the Spirit. In this connection, the weeping icons are a call for all of us to reawaken to the Spirit-filled and grace-bearing nature of the Orthodox Church." "Why Do Icons Weep?"ttp://www.antiochian.org/Orthodox\_Church\_Who\_What\_Where\_Why/Why\_Do\_Icons\_Weep.htm

    There are several occurrences of icons "weeping." See: 'WEEPING VIRGIN' ICON DRAWS THRONGS TO CHICAGO, http://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/22/us/weeping-virgin-icon-draws-throngs-to-chicago.html

    "Virgin Mary Icon In Honolulu Produces Myrrh, Cures Man Of Blindness"

    http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/26/virgin-mary-icon-honolulu\_n\_4346591.html, "Medical Doctor’s eye witness to WEEPING ICON IN CHICAGO" http://www.usmessageboard.com/threads/medical-doctors-eye-witness-to-weeping-icon-in-chicago.439543/ The testimonies of the faithful indicate an increased devotion because of their veneration of these icons. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I don't need to rehash here the controversies between "Cessationists" .i.e., those who argue that the sign gifts of the Holy Spirit have ceased and those who hold that all the spiritual signs and wonders that marked the apostolic age are still available today. While some of the controversy revolves around "glossolalia" or speaking in (strange) tongues, other manifestations are also debated. Interestingly, both groups are willing to pray for God to heal the sick. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)