Five Hundred Years On: What Orthodox Christians Need to Know about the Reformation

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When I was asked by the editors of *The Wheel* to write something about the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, I thought to myself: "What can I write about the Lutheran Reformation that might actually be *useful* to an audience of well-educated, open, and intelligent Orthodox Christians living in a Western context, who are genuinely curious about culture and the world around them?" It occurred to me that my own lived experience places me in an unusually good position to answer this question. I'm something that Orthodox don't often encounter: I'm a reverse convert.

Born a Lutheran, from an old Lutheran family that counts at least four generation of Lutheran pastors, I converted to the Orthodox Church at age nineteen. I was drawn by its sense of tradition, history, and liturgical beauty. Immersed in the lively and progressive ethos of the OCA in the nineties, I was inspired to pursue a career in the Orthodox Church as both an ecumenical officer and a professor of church history and canon law. I served in the administration of the Orthodox Church in America, obtained a doctorate in the history of Eastern canon law, and briefly taught at St. Vladimir's Seminary.

Then, in my late thirties, after something of a theological crisis, I returned to the Lutheran church. My journey into Orthodoxy had been fascinating, sometimes wonderful, sometimes painful; but I realized that it was time to return home.

This journey has left me in the rare position of knowing the Orthodox church exceptionally well from "the inside"—still not very common in the Western academy—while also possessing intimate familiarity with a Protestant tradition.

What insights can I offer from this vantage point? Broadly, I've come to realize that the Orthodox relationship with Protestantism is more complex and more intimate than most people realize. I'll offer a few observations and a few challenges.

An Unknown World

My first observation, born from long experience in the Orthodox world, is a simple one: most Orthodox still don't know much about Protestantism.

The Orthodox are very accustomed to thinking of *themselves* as the unknown quantity, as the neglected tradition that perpetually needs to

be highlighted, distinguished, and introduced to other traditions: they are the "forgotten other." But within Orthodox circles, I've been struck by the degree to which the opposite is true. While there is a certain familiarity with Roman Catholicism, Protestantism remains very poorly understood in the East. Converts aside (and sometimes even then), it's relatively rare, for example, to find an Orthodox who's actually read a classic of Protestant theology or literature—or who could even name one. Eastern seminaries rarely treat Protestant theology. And within Orthodox discourse stereotypes abound: Protestants are seen as biblical fundamentalists, or as wild-eyed liberals, or as having no sense of tradition, or as a bunch of rationalists, or maybe as a bunch of "emotionalists"—and they are almost always seen as wildly fissile and with little sense of Church.

Especially striking is the fact that Orthodox often have little or no sense of the different types of Protestantism. Lutheranism and Methodism or Calvinism and Pentecostalism are arguably more different from each other than, say, Orthodoxy is from Roman Catholicism, or even Orthodoxy from Calvinism. Yet most Orthodox tend to think of Protestantism as a uniform phenomenon. Many Orthodox would be surprised to learn that Anglican theological methodology is closer to their own than Roman Catholic; or that Lutheran sacramental theology probably reads closer to Byzantine than medieval scholastic formulations. But these subtleties—which are not really subtleties!—usually get lost.

Orthodox should do better than this. Whereas Western Christians have made considerable strides in the last fifty years or so in attempting to understand and appreciate the East, the opposite movement is still mostly wanting. An attitude seems to persist in the East that either the Orthodox don't need to know anything about Protestants, or that the little they know is all that matters (this is, incidentally, an old Byzantine viewpoint on anything non-Byzantine). Based on my own experience, this is a serious misjudgment. Until I began to engage with Protestant theology in earnest, I really didn't realize the extent to which Protestant theologies are truly different from anything I had encountered in the Orthodox tradition. For someone used to the Fathers, or medieval theology, Luther is like a thunderbolt. Love him or hate him, Luther is something very new and "other": he has a startlingly different take on the Gospel, the Church, the Bible. What is more, he suggests an entirely different ethos or *way* of doing theology. In this, Protestant theology is much more unknown in Orthodox circles than most Orthodox realize. There is a lot here they *truly don't know*.

The Protestant Within

My next observation stands in seeming contradiction to the first. It is that, while the Orthodox don't consciously cultivate much interest in Protestantism, the influence of Protestantism on Orthodoxy—especially in the West—is in fact incredibly pervasive, though strangely unacknowledged.

This was first driven home to me when I taught Orthodox students in seminary contexts. Listening to the seminarians' basic instincts and desires for building a vibrant Orthodox church in the twentieth century, the church historian in me began to realize that virtually all of their ideas—truth be told—had their pedigree in the Prot-

estant Reformation: vernacular in the liturgy, biblical literacy, flattening of the hierarchy, emphasis on preaching, congregational singing, re-emphasis on the value of marriage, a strong sense of "spiritual equality" among people, more representative forms of governance, and so forth. Theirs was a virtual checklist for the Reformation! Conversely, much of what they *didn't* like was often arguably more properly Orthodox: the strong ascetic/monastic tradition (and particularly the idea of any kind of spiritual "elite"), the purity tradition, the "incremental" ("ladder") virtue tradition, the heavily stratified social and metaphysical universe, a high value on hierarchical authority, and so on.

I also realized, however, that this phenomenon extended far beyond a few westernized seminarians. The more my knowledge of Protestant theology grew, the more I recognized that many modern Orthodox theologians are deeply steeped in Protestantism. Kallistos Ware is an excellent example. Once you read a little nineteenth century Anglican history, it becomes impossible to read him as anything other than a late manifestation of Anglican Tractarianism, a kind of Eastern Newmanism. John Zizioulas? Here the influence is more secular, but his critical milieu is nevertheless defined by early twentieth century existentialist theology, much of it Protestant. What about the Russian religious philosophers and the Slavophiles? Well: read Hegel and the Hegelians. Among the more recent theologians Protestant influence may be even greater. The theology of John Behr, for example, resonates strongly with that of Karl Barth and the Protestant post-liberals.

Don't get me wrong: I don't make these observations to denigrate or detract from the achievements of these Orthodox theologians in any way. Quite the opposite: Orthodox theologians should be in active conversation with the broader Christian world, and they've clearly appropriated these Western theologies in many interesting and creative ways—and of course have something new to offer. But what is strange—and a bit troubling—is that this deep and vital internal engagement with Protestant (and Roman Catholic) theology co-exists with an almost complete external disinterest in this theology and even

Pope Francis greets Archbishop Antje Jackelen, primate of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, during a 2017 celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

disavowal of its influence. I challenge my Orthodox academic friends to self-reflect critically a little on this dynamic: why this peculiar silence? What is going on here, and what purpose does it serve?

Dismissing Protestantism

One result of this strangely indirect and ambivalent relationship with Protestant theology is that the Orthodox can easily fall into the trap of dismissiveness or even contemptuousness of Protestantism and its ideas. You frequently encounter the attitude that, if Protestants simply understood even a little about Orthodoxy, they would immediately convert: that the Protestant theological objections to Orthodoxy are really without any grounds, and can be easily and swiftly dispensed with. The correctness of Orthodoxy is "obvious," so Protestants need to be endured in their naïveté (or stubbornness) until they see the light.

This attitude is perhaps born from the "perfect storm" of the Orthodox both lacking a particularly sustained or direct academic engagement with Protestant theology while at the same time being unaware of how deeply their own Orthodoxy is influenced by Protestantism. This makes it possible to criticize and dismiss straw-man expressions of Protestant theology confidently, while simultaneously assuming that other, profounder Protestant streams are *Orthodox* tradition. So the Orthodox might criticize the excesses of certain modern Protestant liturgical practices while every week enjoying congregational singing, the text in the vernacular, and a Bible study following the Liturgy. Or they might find fault with the worldliness of some Protestant parliamentary processes while nevertheless enjoying numerous protections against the abuse of hierarchical authority in their own Church—protections that have their origins in Protestant church orders and the theology of the "priesthood of all believers" (not to mention the Enlightenment). Or they might excoriate the "individualism" of the Protestant doctrinal world while still expecting to be able to ask questions of their priests, to be doctrinally educated, to receive a creative sermon each week, and to understand their own tradition fully.

You can see how this situation can quickly degrade into a routine contemptuousness: in effect, you can easily decide that all the weaknesses of Protestantism are Protestantism's "proper" characteristics, while all its strengths are your own tradition!

Weirdly, this dismissiveness seems especially common among converts from Protestantism. My experience might give a clue why. I converted to Orthodoxy when I was nineteen. My knowledge of church history and doctrine was probably above average for someone of my age, but it was nevertheless that of a *teenager*. So while I went on to grow and develop an adult understanding of Orthodoxy, my perception of Protestantism was frozen at an earlier stage of development. Psychologically, this made it much easier for me to be dismissive towards Protestantism: I was in effect always dismissing the perceptions of Protestantism of a romantic nineteen-year-old smitten with Orthodoxy! A similar situation probably prevails when converts come from more radical fringes of Protestantism, where some of the doctrines are truly extreme (creationism, Biblical literalism, and so forth). It's not difficult to understand why such converts adopt a

dismissive attitude towards their Protestant background. For them, Orthodoxy represents a very big step up in theological complexity. It's their first real experience of an intellectually rigorous tradition.

Pushing Back

Whatever their source, I think it is useful to push back against some of the most common Orthodox dismissals of Protestantism.

"Beyond and Above Western Debates"

The first is the idea that critiques of Protestantism simply don't apply to Orthodoxy. This is the idea that Protestantism is so locked in a proprietary "Western" theological worldview that it can't even comprehend the categories and methods of Eastern theology: Orthodoxy stands outside of, and above, the Western Reformation debates. Protestant theology therefore doesn't even have the *possibility* of critically engaging Orthodoxy.

On a superficial level, there is of course some truth to the idea that, until recently, Protestantism and Orthodoxy developed with little direct contact with other. Historically they come from quite different traditions, with different languages, and there have been relatively few moments of profound interchange.

But on a deeper level, the notion that Protestants don't fundamentally understand Orthodoxy is profoundly untrue. If there is one thing I've learned spending the last five years reading Luther, it is that Luther had his finger *exactly* on the pulse of Orthodoxy as surely as he did on that of Roman Catholicism. His critique cuts

Commemorative objects for the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation appeared across the world in 2017, including these nutcrackers of Pope Benedict XVI and Martin Luther.

to the core of both traditions, because he knows precisely what makes the old late antique "imperial" tradition tick, whether Eastern or Western. In fact, it's astonishing, almost uncanny, to watch how deftly and systematically this obscure German monk is able to identify and critique all the central pillars of the late antique synthesis (something, ironically, that only my knowledge of Orthodox theology has allowed me to appreciate): mimesis, spiritual-ontological stratification, salvation as ascesis/virtue/growth, deification, Christianity as a practice of exegesis, faith as knowledge (rational or contemplative), and so forth. In fact, it may be that—because Luther's critique delves so deeply, to the very roots of not only the "imperial synthesis," but actually to the whole classical Greco-Roman tradition itself—the Orthodox can simply miss how serious and on-point a challenge Luther represents. Focused on the "upper stories" of specific atonement theories, or attitudes toward the Bible or sacramental theology, Orthodox readers fail to notice that the real critique is happening much lower down, at the very foundation of the whole edifice.

So the idea that the Protestant tradition doesn't "get" the East is quite wrong. Protestant theology gets Orthodoxy a whole lot better than the Orthodox think. The Protestants simply *disagree.* And the Orthodox might want to learn why.

"Centuries of Tradition"

One aspect of Orthodoxy that the Orthodox feel Protestants are particularly unable to appreciate is the significance of tradition. They feel Protestants are simply irrational to discount the validating power of centuries of historical continuity in form, practice and belief. I understand this assumption very well. I shared it. How could the Protestant narrative of church history jump so blithely from the first century to the sixteenth—almost as if the Church didn't exist until then—and attach so little authority to the intervening centuries of liturgical, doctrinal, legal, and other development? This always seemed profoundly unwise to me.

But I slowly came to understand why Luther and the other reformers could be so unconcerned about tradition. I had missed two important things.

First, proponents of "tradition arguments" tend to idealize the late antique and medieval tradition as a huge, rich, variegated body of practices and beliefs that was gradually tested and refined, and ultimately shaped into a rich, time-tested consensus. But we forget that the Christianity of, say, the fourth-eleventh (and even up to the fifteenth) centuries, while diverse to a point, was in many respects a remarkably univocal and static phenomenon. At its core, it was basically the cultural Christianity of the southern Mediterranean of the late classical period (fourth through sixth centuries). Via its legal "establishment" in the empire in the fourth century, and successor polities, it maintained its integrity and stability for centuries via *legal, political, and cultural enforcement*—let's not imagine free debates flourishing! Of course it developed numerous local permutations and particularities, but throughout most of this period it was remarkably impervious to real critique or change: the fundamental categories, instincts, and ontology of the late antique world remained determinative for almost all later developments, and were virtually never seriously challenged. And most of the debates

that did happen hardly scratched the roots of fundamental assumptions (to ask, for example, whether deification is a good idea).

So for Luther to reject the authority of this tradition is not quite as unreasonable as it may first appear. He was essentially questioning one relatively narrow and local synthesis, and one that legal and political authority largely insulated from serious critique. It just happens that almost everything until the fifteenth century was dependent upon this one local synthesis.

The second thing I didn't fully appreciate were the problems inherent in doing theology as a matter of "battling traditions"—problems which become quite apparent when one surveys the history of Orthodox–Roman Catholic relations (for example, check out the *azymes* controversy). Luther was trying to imagine a new way of doing theology in which orthodoxy would be defined not by levels of adherence to a sprawling tradition—where *everything* takes on truth value—but by adherence to a simple substantive Gospel message: salvation by grace *alone*, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Beyond this, everyone could maintain whatever tradition he or she chose—as long as it inculcated this Gospel. This, I think, is neither irrational nor unwise.

"The (Most) Divine Liturgy"

One final and more popular-level point where I think Protestantism is often simply dismissed: liturgy. The Orthodox tend to believe—as a kind of obvious point—that their liturgical and aesthetic experience is intrinsically superior to that of others and contains something which all others both lack and need.

Here I must say that the Orthodox liturgical tradition is very special: it should be regarded as a major treasure of world Christianity. The Orthodox liturgy played a significant role in my own attraction to the Orthodox Church. I loved the sacramental spirituality, the contemplativeness, the premodern "unconsciousness" of the theology, the ritual and tactile communication, and so on.

"Your Luther was wrong about many questions!"

But a few reality-checks:

First, it is entirely possible to not be attracted to the Orthodox aesthetic at all. I've known many people who don't like the music, the rituals, or the art. Does this aversion reflect some spiritual defectiveness on their part? I don't think so. It's taste. Some people like jazz; some don't. Some like Beethoven; some don't. Some people like Slavic/Greek/Coptic/Syriac art and music; some don't.

"To err is human...and what I like about your pope is his humanity."

More importantly, even for those of us who are attracted to it, I feel obliged to say that love of the Orthodox liturgy can dim. This was certainly the case for me. Over time I became increasingly sensitive to its weaknesses. Yes, there are some theologically brilliant bits, but there are also long stretches of semantic aridity. Yes, the premodern allusiveness and associativeness of the texts is intriguing and stimulating, but this can come at the cost of coherence and intelligibility. Yes, the length and number of services can represent a refreshing discipline, but they can become genuinely wearing and draining. Yes, the cultivation of an aura of sacredness and hierarchy can be conducive to certain types of prayer, but the distance they create between clergy and laity, men and women, sacred and profane can quickly become alienating and exclusionary—and inhospitable to prayer. Yes the ritualism can be rich, a whole different "vocabulary" of worship, but it can descend into a starched and suffocating atmosphere where ritual propriety wins over kindness and respect for the worshipers. And broadly, if you aren't part of the liturgical production—as a member of the choir or clergy, a reader, or something similar—the experience is markedly passive.

I didn't really realize how true all of this had become for me until I returned to the Protestant world. I can't tell you how relieved I was by the simplicity and naturalness of Protestant worship. It was a breath of fresh air to see women and men serving communion, touching the altar, reading, preaching, leading the worship. There is something profoundly good about the sense of ease that permeates how

Protestants gather, move, and interact with each other when they come to worship God. Even the annoying "infantilism" of so much modern Protestant liturgical practice (a strange phenomenon) was oddly refreshing: I actually wept when some of the very simple songs and tunes conveyed to me something that, to be honest, I hadn't felt in many years: an overriding message of complete acceptance and love. After twenty years years of Orthodox heaven, I was happy to return to Protestant earth.

My point in all of this is not that the Orthodox liturgy is bad or the Protestant good. It's simply that the Orthodox liturgy has its strengths and weaknesses, just as the Protestant liturgy has its strengths and weaknesses. It's a great thing for Protestants to experience the Orthodox liturgical tradition, but the opposite is every bit as true too!

Final Thought

On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, what do I want to leave *The Wheel* readers with?

Over the past century or so the Orthodox have been engaged in a process of rediscovering and retrieving their own identity in the face of a dominant Western theological narrative. This has been a critically important process for global Christianity.

One result of this process, however, has been to encourage Orthodox thought to confine itself to a discourse of perpetual introduction, self-promotion, and contradistinction. This tendency can discourage substantive engagement with other theological traditions, and can lead to stereotyping and blanket statements of rejection, while deflecting attention for important points of influence.

Delegates of the seventeenth Plenary Session of the International Joint Commission on the Theological Dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, Helsinki, Finland, November 2017

I hope that Orthodox discourse will enter a new, and deeper, phase of encounter with broader Christian theology. I hope that there is now a sufficient level of "safety" for the Orthodox to feel a real comfort—a sense of *relaxedness*—with conversation about how Orthodox theology has and should engage with broader streams of thought. Evidence of this could emerge in a few forms. I would love to see, for example, modern Orthodox theologians regularly, openly, and extensively situate their theology in its broader contexts—to enter *directly* the conversations in which they are, in fact, already indirectly engaged. I would love to see histories of Orthodoxy theology written which routinely explore the extensive cross-pollination of Orthodoxy with Reformation and (actually, more importantly) Counter-Reformation thought. I would love to see Orthodox seminaries explore and appreciate their own locatedness in Western thought—and possibly hire some Protestants and Catholics to assist with this.

All of this will require a renewed sense of confidence and peace of mind—a kind of theological *apatheia*, to put it in Eastern terms. It will require not fearing challenge and not fearing self-critique; it will require a sense of fallibility; it will require a deep sense of trust that truth is God's, not ours.

Of course nobody is particularly good at any of these things. But I think the Orthodox have a lot of resources and a lot of strength: a move in this direction is far from impossible. ❋

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