

I watched with respect and admiration as that intellectual honesty and spiritual thoughtfulness led him over the years to question and even change his views on the liturgical roles of women in the Church.

I am very sorry that I missed seeing him the last time I was in the UK, about

three years ago. We were scheduled to have tea at his home, but he was called to the Patriarchate unexpectedly. As it turns out, it would have been my last chance to share an embrace and to see in person his twinkling eyes as he cracked a joke. He is truly among the saints. May his memory be eternal—
Αἰωνία αὐτοῦ ἡ μνήμη! ✨



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IN MEMORIAM

On the Loss of Kallistos

Jonathan Tobias

1989: I wander into the tiny library of my wife's native Orthodox Church. I find an old, thin, four-by-nine-inch copy of *The Orthodox Church*, by an Englishman, Timothy Ware. It is printed in tiny, cramped paper that has gone brittle and musty over the years.

Tempus fugit. Fast forward.

Metropolitan Kallistos reposed in the Lord on August 24, 2022. I pray, along with many others, "Memory Eternal! Vechnaja Pamjat." And while I pray this, other thoughts arise.

The passing of this wonderful, generous teacher and hierarch will become an inflection point. His departure from us who remain in the "church militant" means the loss of his physical presence, his voice, and the possibility of new writings. It is also likely to signal a high

tide mark, after which the waters will turn and recede.

Decades ago, in 1990, I was converted from Evangelical Protestantism to Eastern Orthodoxy. It was a hard journey. I had been brought up with the certainty that the only possible real Christianity was my particular sectarian upbringing. It was a "fundamentalist" experience. There was a constant hyper-vigilance about—even a fear of—modernism. We were bound by a literalism that was, I discovered later, inconsistent.

It was also emotional and experiential: we were all bound by a shared, self-reported crisis experience, something Billy Graham called "the hour of decision." We sought "mountaintop" moments of cathartic ecstasy, unbound and unlimited by "programmed worship."

Nearly everything about Orthodoxy was patently opposed to this religious upbringing. Icons, saints, priests and bishops, the idea of Holy Tradition, the “smells and bells,” the Eucharist, and the structure of Divine Liturgy were not only strange to this “free church” evangelical, but even presented themselves as points of guilt. It was as though I was betraying my native soil by wandering off into this radically different language and people.

But against these obstacles, I soldiered on. And I made many unforced errors. I still harbor many regrets from that time of conversion. I was rude to my family and my friends from the religion I was converting away from. I was insufferable. I spoke with an egregious superiority, as if theology resided in me alone and not at all with my interlocutors. Truly, “wisdom died with me”—that is, just as with Job’s “friends,” wisdom shriveled at the echo of my voice. Everyone would have been better off had I remained quiet and humble, loving and patient.

Thank God for the writings of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. *The Orthodox Church* and *The Orthodox Way* were gentle, confident, and hopeful lights to me. So also were the writings and the voice of Father Thomas Hopko. And Paul Evdokimov. And Olivier Clément.

These voices kept urging, gently and pastorally, the gospel of Trinitarian *kenosis* and the possibility of participation in grace. They presented a generous, beautiful Orthodoxy. I heard from them the promise of an Orthodox evangel that was truly *good* news. Maybe, just maybe, a *whole lot* of people will be saved, instead of just a tiny raptured few. Maybe there was a better eschatology than the rather occult one presented by the ilk of Jack T. Chick’s comic book “This Is Your Life.”

So I converted, traveling from the evangelical “free church” culture to the much older, broader, and far richer culture of Eastern Orthodoxy. I made my trip about the same time as Franky Schaeffer and hundreds of other evangelicals. And I did something that many of my fellow ex-evangelicals did. I carried my fundamentalism with me. I forced the “round” ascetical disciplines of Orthodoxy into the square hole of my latent, but still potent, legalism of my past religion. I extrapolated the Biblical literalism of my past (which I had called “inerrancy”) onto an expanded canon: I was enthused by not only the expanded scriptural canon, but also a larger, inerrant (so I supposed) patristic canon—inerrant, at least, for some favored texts.

My theology had not changed essentially—it was only augmented with a few more facts. Now I had new chapters, including sacramentology, liturgics, a little hagiology. But in the center of my theology, not much had changed. I wasn’t troubled too much by Trinitarian theology or anything beyond the Chalcedonian formula for Christology. I was still a sentimental voluntarist. Still quite an infernalist: eternal hell remained a postulate logically necessary for my cramped doctrinal system.

The unconscious rubric was to augment my fundamentalism with additional Orthodox propositions. Kenosis remained ephemeral and abstract. Trinitarian perichoresis remained even further out, in the realm of nominal, unthinking assent. And the notions of methexis and sophiology lay beyond any of my questions, any existential need.

And so I came into Orthodoxy as an “evangelical of the Byzantine Rite.” I was happy to sign on with the crowd of fellow travelers who

desired a hyper-conservative brand of Christianity. Perhaps, we told ourselves, Orthodoxy was a more robust defense against the peril of liberalism.

It wasn't much of a jump from Orthodox traditionalism to rightwing political ideology. In the 1990s, many of us styled ourselves "refugees from the West." We denounced Aristotle and nominalism—without, I must admit, understanding exactly why. But it sure sounded cool. I started to blog in 2005. In an earlier post (I think in either 2005 or 2006), I wrote straight out that the Orthodox Church should be thankful for the influx of us ex-evangelicals. Why? you may ask. Easy, I said: to keep you conservative.

That article was picked up by a well-known conservative Orthodox site and relayed from there to other like-minded blogs. I made a minor name for myself (more a footnote than anything else) by complaining about "liberal" Orthodox scholars and writers. I didn't work too hard at comprehending their arguments. It was sufficient to categorize them under the heading of "modernizers" and "accommodationists."

Yes. I remained insufferable, especially when I was writing as a new convert, possessing very little common sense and unaffected by real Orthodox theology and ethos. Still, I kept reading Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, and Father Tom Hopko, and Evdokimov. But I was proud to be associated with the growing movement of traditionalists and "ortho-bros" in the Orthodox internet community. No one's going to make our new Orthodox home liberal. We're not going to go the way of the Episcopalians, no sirree. Not on our watch.

I started to read other writers. David Bentley Hart's *Beauty of the Infinite*

figured as a sea change in my thinking. Though it might pain others to hear this, Hart's work, with his rambunctious style and dauntless logic, started to lay waste the scrubby terrain of my doctrinal thought. From there: John Milbank and others in the Radical Orthodoxy movement. Then, crucially, Pavel Florensky and Sergius Bulgakov.

I collected a ragtag crew of correspondents and colleagues in the Orthosphere from those days, way back when. Weird, strange names: we had to be possessed of a certain elan, a spark. The Axegrinder was one. There were other regrettable puns and plays on theologisms and neologisms: Monomakhos was one, Energetic Procession another, American Orthodoxy this or that, even Men in Black (not the movie), and several danced around the word "anamnesis." This corner of the Orthosphere produced another neologism: the well-deserved term "hyperdoxy." Once in a while it was well intended; too often it descended into cruelty. My own place was (and continues to be) "Second Terrace," which is actually a recondite allusion to Dante's *Purgatorio*.¹ And there was the Ochlophobist, whose writer and his family remain on my proskomedias commemorations. All kinds of folks have disappeared (having left in a hissy fit or been disappeared for, let's just say, being more than a bubble off plumb) from my social media neighborhood, but they remain as crumbs on my plate.

Those were the innocent—or rather, mostly innocent—halcyon days. I was naive. I was one of those jejune, brash dilettantes who mistook self-induced, manufactured play-acting and posturing for courage and confidence. I misrepresented wisdom and theology with smug opinion that was clever on occasion, but induced wincing from my wiser friends more times than not.

¹ Jonathan Tobias, *Second Terrace*, blog, <https://janotec.typepad.com/terrace/>.

From others? Justified academic contempt. And I bear them no ill will now (it took a while), as I more than abundantly deserved it.

All the while, there was Timothy Ware. Then Archimandrite Kallistos. Then Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia. Then Metropolitan Kallistos.

I met him once in Boston, at Holy Cross. At a lecture, I asked him an ignorant question about priests hearing confession (I was a deacon at the time). He was charmingly forgiving: I didn't know that in the Greek Archdiocese, not all priests were granted the authority to hear confessions. I met him again, a year or two later, in Cleveland. He spoke winsomely and graciously, as expected. I got his autograph. I don't think the folks in my van up to Cleveland were all that impressed. They wanted something more aggressive, less theological, but more along the lines of the rising anti-modernist temper of the time.

Kallistos didn't seem to show the requisite interest in "culture war," that scurrilous invention of Pat Buchanan and Lee Atwater, inflamed by Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and their ilk, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*, which seemed to fan so many convert flames.

Ah, yes, how sharply I remember. Proudly I donned my cassock and played bingo on the charter bus down to DC for the National Right to Life March in January 1992 and '93 and '94 and '95 (I'm not counting here the pre-Orthodox marching years and protests at hospitals in Pittsburgh in the 80s). Proudly I walked as one of the front deacons, trouping like an Old World entourage around the Orthodox hierarchs as we led the black-robed parade of culture warriors. We carried our signs, bore our banners, chanted our commemorations and Trisagions.

As the years progressed, more and more political, partisan signs littered the parade. Extremist language began to dominate not only the March, but American Orthodoxy in general. All sorts of modernist transgressions were threatening the faithful. There were all kinds of "Others" perceived, in darkening gaze, as cropping up on the horizon, posing existential threat.

Still, there was Kallistos, talking about hesychia. Praying the Jesus Prayer. Describing a generous freedom in Orthodoxy. Humility. Meekness. Pastoral kenosis. Self-denial. The way of the cross. It seemed that his whole self was fully engaged in thinking and living from the truth of the Trinity and the Grace that infinitely streamed from it. He was all about Christology—the union of divinity and humanity and the prayer that beheld that union and invoked it, from the depths of the soul out into the world, as salt and light.

His was an Orthodoxy that was becoming more and more sharply distinct from—almost the opposite of—the construct of "American Orthodoxy" invented by me and my fellow rightwing converts from fundamentalism. But he hadn't moved anywhere. Instead, we crypto-fundamentalists had moved American Orthodoxy to our sentimental and partisan liking.

There was one moment that remains, in my memory, a symbol of my divorce from my partisan squadron. It was back in the days of President Barack Obama's first administration. I received a breathless email from a soon-to-be ex-friend. He wanted me to review a manifesto he was drawing up to send to Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (the precursor of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America). He wanted to apprise them of the frightening changes in

American demographics. “We must, as Orthodox Christians who care about America,” he gushed, “do everything in our power to protect the caucasian majority, and ensure its prominence for generations to come.”

There was a lot more of that in his fever dream. I wrote him back: “This could be construed as racist.” He replied, quickly: “No it’s not. It’s patriotic. It’s Orthodox American.” I told him never to write me again until he changed his ways. Haven’t seen or heard such a thing since.

And he’s not alone. Many have entered the lists of the culture wars. Many have indoctrinated themselves in the ideologies of modernist peril. Many have written reams and recorded podcasts and interviews and lectures at conferences, beating the drum and sounding the alarm against globalism, secularism, cultural Marxism, and critical race theory, as well as dangerous books like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and even Harry Potter. Authorities have issued ukases forbidding academic discussion about sexuality.

Large swathes of American Orthodoxy have enthusiastically enlisted in the conspiracy theory occult of anti-vaxxing and anti-masking, and have swallowed the Big Lie hook, line, and sinker. One of my erstwhile priest friends actually participated in the January 6th debacle. Many smugly despise democracy and its essential secularity and multiculturalism. They long instead for a Putinesque authoritarian politics and happily participate in the constriction of suffrage. Many of these lionize Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary. It *shouldn’t* be believed, but such a thing is becoming more commonplace, not less, these days. Clergy and monastics should never have made authoritative

statements against vaccines, or engaged in extremist, partisan, anti-democratic speech.

Several years ago, I was taken to the woodshed by a brand new convert. Online, of course. I was quoting something on Orthodox angelology (yes, there is such a thing). The earnest young man informed me that I was publishing heresy. He also announced that he had been given a blessing by his priest to go after heretics wherever he found them. So he found me. I informed him that I was quoting Pseudo-Dionysius, from his *Celestial Hierarchy*. I also informed him that he, too, needed to make things right. I haven’t heard from him either.

Come to think of it, I probably shouldn’t have mentioned the “pseudo” part. I’m sure that didn’t help my case.

I understand things a little better now. That essay I wrote so long ago, on how we converts can keep Orthodoxy “conservative”? I had no clue what “conservative” meant, and what it is was going to mean. I meant faithfulness to the Nicene Creed. I thought that Orthodox patristics was one big and completely consistent elaboration of a single seamless tradition, a single *theoria*, a single, homogeneous *phronema*. I did not appreciate what others—and I mean the majority of others—meant by “conservative.”

And I’ve had to make my peace with the complications and ambiguities of history, especially church history. Tradition is not seamless. It is not just elaboration. The Orthodox phronema cannot be programmed or reduced to shibboleths. The way phronema has been marketed these days, it’s become something of a modern instrumental device. I traded in my triumphalism for the song of the Theotokos: “He has

filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away.”

I think we American Orthodox are afraid. The world is changing. People are changing. The contours of life today are not what they were, and they will not be what they are now. In our heart of hearts, we know the climate is changing, drastically: we may say otherwise out loud to coddle ourselves, but we know better at 3:00 AM.

Our political conservatism has been radicalized into authoritarian extremism. Again, we might protest and say otherwise, but the fact stands nonetheless. In our fear and lack of confidence, we have taken the easy way out and have gone into a hermetic, legalistic retreat, both psychic and physical. We’ve taken leaves from the book of the Pharisees and called them canon, which some of us have granted inerrant scriptural authority: we “compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, we make him twofold more the child of hell than ourselves.”

There really is something comforting, even luxurious and soporific, about rigorism and authoritarianism. Even racism and ethnocentrism and phobia-based privilege beckon, like the Sirens on the lee and mortal shore.

The real world is frightening. It is shattering old conventions. In many ways, it’s a very attractive, easier alternative to don a new identity, a new appearance, even a new name, and to embrace ritual without hard theology,

custom without hard ethics, cult without evangel, asceticism without love. All in the rubric of denial. Shrink the Other into a straw man, then we can tell ourselves—like Isaiah’s “chirping and twittering wizards”—that we’ve settled things. In too many places, too many speeches, we’ve joined in with the mad crowd that dragged Jeremiah to despair, repeating the magic incantation: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.”

The foundations of old certainties are shaking. Maybe they need to be shaken. Our old institutions are tottering. Maybe it is time for that, too.

It is a harder thing to be salt and light in the real world, without demanding that the world change, without denouncing the world for being the world. It is a harder thing to “let our light shine,” to follow the kenotic ways of the Savior who washed the feet of his friends as the Suffering Servant, to deny oneself and take up his cross and follow him. It is a harder thing to love the world as God so loved it.

It’s time to remember and embrace the even older certainties. It’s time to imbibe deeply from the springs of Trinitarian and Christological truth. It’s time to be less American, and more Sermon on the Mount Orthodox Christians. It’s time to sing the Magnificat with our Queen again. It’s time to be more like Metropolitan Kallistos: more like him, and less like what I used to be. ✱



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