Have We Traded the Holy Spirit for Ideology?

Gayle E. Woloschak

The Orthodoxy of my youth no longer exists in the United States (or perhaps in the world) today. The young, immigrant-heavy American Church had grown up into an openness to change, liturgical reform, improved conciliar approaches to Church governance, and a dynamic parish interaction. Influenced by a call from theologians (most notably Fr. Alexander Schmemann) for a rediscovery of the centrality of the Eucharist in the Church, the request for frequent communion originated not from the bishops, but as a groundswell from the people. This Eucharistic renaissance in North America became only a first step in cultivating a Church characterized by open discussion, the free exchange of ideas, and increased participation of all members in its life. The environment was stimulating, dynamic, and charismatic. It was not perfect, but there were few forbidden topics. The goal of discussion was often simply to have a dialogue, rather than to achieve new, binding formulations. Differences of opinion were cherished as paths to the expression of a deeper truth about the reality of the Church's life in the world. Genuine reflection on the question at hand, in which participants strove to express the validity and reasoning of various theological perspectives, was an appropriate and desirable goal of these open discussions.

As a long-standing practicing member of the Church, I have witnessed the ebb of these positive attitudes and the growth of a fear of discourse and communal introspection. Counting Church members in numbers rather than the spirit they bring has gradually transformed the Orthodox Church into an institution similar to all other member-seeking organizations, one that caters its agenda to those who can be attracted to come rather than one that continues to seek the truth through the communal discernment of its people. Today, Orthodox dialogue on difficult issues is perceived as threatening to the Church rather than enriching it and is strongly discouraged at almost all levels. Thus, "minor improprieties" such as church attendance by unwed families may be fully accepted in one parish or fully rejected in another, depending on the situation and on what can be expected to bring new members or preserve old membership. Concomitantly, wider issues at the intersection of science and religion are not discussed, but are exposed instead to a make-believe scrutiny imported from Western Evangelical Christianity. This leaves the strong impression that the only purpose of these issues is to serve as rallying points for new or potential congregants who are theologically dedicated to the piecemeal rejection of contemporary scientific theory and research. The need to express "the" Orthodox position on all matters has become the new ecclesial imperative, curbing the debate and discussion that allows the Holy Spirit

to work within the Church (both in its "daily operations" and its overarching functions). We have replaced theological dialogue with ideological rigidity, and it is strangling the Church.

The Importance of Dialogue

The Church was created for its people through the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's expression in the Church depends on the people who comprise it, and its operation is evident through human interaction and dialogue. Fr. Dumitru Staniloae noted that the Holy Spirit and personhood are intertwined, so that a person comes alive only within the context of a relationship and possesses the Holy Spirit only in relationship with others. This gives a sacred dimension to human interaction that is especially dependent upon speech and communication. In some cases, this sacred communication has been related to the conciliar nature of the Church. For example, for Fr. Schmemann, the core of the theological description of *sobornost* was the unity of persons engaged in a conciliar discourse.

Speech is inherently important for humans, the richness of its form setting us apart from all other animals. Many believe that language evolved when early hominids gradually changed their primate communication systems, slowly acquiring the ability to form a theory of other minds and shared intentionality. Because deep concepts depend on complex verbalization, it appears self-evident that a spiritual dimension to human life (as evidenced in our burial of the dead, for example) evolved after the development of speech. Speech allowed for intimate personal experiences to be shared and therefore allowed humans to be aware of the inner life of entities other than themselves, providing the possibility of relationship and communion.

Throughout the works of the Church fathers and the saints, we see the importance of speech and dialogue for humanity and for our interactions with each other and with God. The Genesis story provides an example when it relates Adam's task of providing a name for each of the animals. What is the importance of giving a name to something, and what are the things that we name? In general, we name those things for which we are responsible and with which we have intimate relations: our children, our pets, occasionally our homes, ranches, or farms. (In some Orthodox families, the godparent names the godchild in order to reflect the responsibility the godparent has in the child's upbringing.) The story of Adam naming the animals reflects human responsibility for animals and for the earth as a whole.

But is that all? Fr. Sergius Bulgakov attributed more than responsibility to this naming, noting that as Adam spoke the names of the animals, he learned something about himself: that he was not like them, and that he was alone. The mere speaking of the names of the animals was a teaching experience for Adam. Bulgakov believed that there was a logical significance to this naming. In his book *Icons and the Name of God*, he wrote:

The name itself and naming could be considered a human invention existing only for man and in man. The Archangel's Annunciation of the Name of God, which is also a human name, revealed to the world and to humanity that the name of God is and therefore is also a human naming. … This imparts to naming a mysterious, profound, and realistic character. This affirmation, namely that the name enters into the image of God in man … constitutes the most profound ontological basis of naming: thought collides here with the power of fact.[1]

[1] Sergius Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 147.

Earlier in Genesis there is yet another example of the importance of speech and communication: the Church fathers remind us that God created by *speaking*. This implies a relationship between speaking and creativity. If one also accepts a relationship between creativity and the Holy Spirit, then the action of speaking is tied to the Holy Spirit. People develop new ideas as they talk or even as they are interacting with or listening in groups of others. Think tanks and universities gather groups of people together to talk about problems and develop solutions; the act of talking, of speaking, is more productive for developing creative ideas than is the process of putting individuals in a series of separate locations and asking them to think alone to find a solution to a problem. The Church has often expressed this link between speaking, creativity, and the action of the Holy Spirit, all tied together mystically and charismatically.

Finally, in the Church, there is a connection between speaking and confession, as has been noted by Aristotle Papanikolaou.[2] Many therapists working with prisoners have noted that prisoners who admit their crimes are on a better road to recovery than those who never admit what they have done. In Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov,* Dmitry, while in prison for a crime he did not commit, admits his guilt of being an uncaring human being and becomes sanctified by the action of confession, which enables him to accept the help and love of his brothers. Speech about our own deficiencies unburdens us from our problems and helps us to work through our concerns. Confession of one's sins is an essential component of repentance; one of the first steps in healing is naming the sin (a Christian concept that has been adopted by many, including twelve-step programs for recovery from different addictions).

The Church is grounded in conciliarity, a principle that has as its model the Holy Trinity. Each person lives not for himself but for the other, as pointed out by Costa Carras.[3] The Trinity offers a model of unity in diversity within the Church, where differences of perspective, culture, liturgical practice, and more are not only tolerated but integrated, becoming not hindrances but in fact essential. The fact that four Gospels are accepted by the Church, despite their divergence in perspectives and their disagreement in regard to many facts, suggests that the Church survives—and thrives—in diversity. Slight differences that we are expected to notice and appreciate give more depth to our understanding and belief in the Gospels. If we chose to commit ourselves to a single literal text, we would be impoverished; we would be denying ourselves the possibility of spiritual introspection. Instead of communication, we would embrace repetition, and our belief would simply become a panacea against fear of God, dulled and impersonal.

Ideology Undermines Dialogue

This value in speaking, that of producing creative ideas, of putting words into actions and allowing them to function, has a special relevance to the situation of Orthodoxy in North America today, where genuine dialogue and reflection on many issues have been replaced with the expression of ideologies. What is the difference? Ideology usually refers to a set of ideas that are highly politicized, proposed, and upheld by a group within society, often in the absence of explicit experience or discussion. Manfred B. Steger and Paul James have defined ideologies as "patterned clusters of normatively-imbued ideas and concepts, including particular representations of power relations, carrying claims to social truth—as, for

[2] Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Honest to God: Confession and Desire," in *Thinking Through Faith*, ed. Aristotle Papanikolaou and Elizabeth Prodromou (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 219–246.

[3] Costa Carras, "The Problems of Conciliarity," *Sourozh* 35 (1989): 38.

example, expressed in liberalism, conservatism, and socialism."[4] In Church situations, claims to social truth easily become replaced with claims to religious truth at the expense of conciliarity. Dialogue, on the other hand, is an open exchange of ideas or opinions with a view to reaching an amicable agreement on an issue (or in some cases, an agreement to disagree).

An ideology is based on an established intellectual framework that resists challenges or the advance of new ideas. In my daily work in biomedical science, I have seen many cases where deficient classical paradigms remain unchallenged for years because new data do not fit in with current thinking in the field. Culturally, acceptance of particular ideologies in past centuries has had dangerous consequences: the devastating religious wars of seventeenth-century Europe and the global martial chaos of the century just past are painful witnesses to the consequences of inflexible ideological dictates. But while adoption of such ideological rigidity is detrimental in science and politics, it is especially so in the Church.

Too often in contemporary North America, overzealous application of political ideologies adversely shapes public debate on issues ranging from economics and science to social concerns such as homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia. The extension of intellectual frameworks derived mainly from the political arena to life within the Church impoverishes the latter and reduces it from the Body of Christ that seeks the salvation of souls to a tool for the advancement of political aims. The Church has a rich history and tradition of dialogue and discussion of complex issues that resist reduction to a single slogan or catchy phrase. When wrestling with issues that are complicated and idiosyncratic in nature, the Church often employs the principle of *oikonomia* (managing the household). This *oikonomia* can be used to permit a behavior that "goes against the rules" in an effort to facilitate the salvation of the person's soul, or to acknowledge human limitations in understanding matters that only God can judge adequately.

When we ignore the principle of *oikonomia* and concentrate on ideological fixations, what happens to the Church? Dialogue is hampered, discussion of difficult issues is muted, and too many make unfounded a priori assumptions to know the Church's teaching on any issue in any circumstance. This leads to a judgmental and confrontational environment that is hurtful to openness and Spirit-filled discussion. Worse, stances motivated primarily by political ideology may contravene the actual teachings of the Orthodox Church.

Let us take, for example, the topic of evolution. I am a scientist who sees no incompatibility between Orthodox teachings and the theory of evolution. In most Orthodox academic circles, very few scholars oppose evolution or view it as conflicting with Orthodox teachings. Nevertheless, despite the actual noncontroversial status of evolution within Orthodox theology, I have been severely attacked by individuals and groups who think that evolution is contrary to the teachings of the Church and who refuse to discuss the issue other than to say that "evolution is not biblical," a proposition based in a biblical literalism that is foreign to Orthodoxy and should be discarded as discordant with the Church fathers and their understanding of Scripture. True growth in the Church is hindered by preconceived notions that speak more to the contemporary political environment than to the Orthodox Church.

[4] Paul James and Manfred B. Steger, "Introduction," in *Globalization and Culture, vol. 4: Ideologies of Globalism*, ed. Paul James and Manfred B. Steger (London: Sage Publications, 2010), xii.

What Can Be Done?

Dialogue within the Church on the numerous topics that face our world needs to be fostered at all levels—in academic centers, in regional discussions, and in local parishes. Especially pertinent today are questions at the intersection of science and religion, relating to genetics and genetic counseling, therapeutic use of stem cells, and more. As social justice and equality are often measured in terms of technological opportunities, should the Orthodox faithful embrace or reject these possibilities? Unfortunately, the Orthodox churches' response to such questions has often been to release position statements without thorough and deliberate internal investigation and discernment. For example, positions on in vitro fertilization mostly just replicate the non-Orthodox texts on this topic released by other Christian denominations. Yet most such concerns require case-by-case decisions (after all, these technologies are themselves more and more often "personalized"), similar to an approach employing *oikonomia* rather than a legalistic or doctrinal formulation. One cannot, for example, make a decision that a particular chemotherapeutic regimen should *always* be accepted because it tends to lengthen life. Instead, the more proper approach (and that used clinically in most medical centers in the United States today) is to tailor the therapy to the patient. A decision for treatment of an early stage cancer or for that of a young person with no other disease may be very different from a decision made for a late-stage cancer or for an elderly patient already debilitated with other problems. Categorical approaches are typically unhelpful because of the numerous circumstances in which they will not be applicable. Therefore, Orthodox discussion of these topics should not be motivated by the need to generate a consensus statement at the end; the goal of the discussion should be the discussion itself.

Resistance to discussion is often expressed by members of the Church who protest particular issues "on principle," ranging from evolution to homosexuality, from global warming to the ordination of deaconesses. Conversations about many of these topics are rejected on arbitrary grounds. For instance, many refuse to countenance the development of adult stem cell technologies because they wrongly assume that all stem cells that exist are derived from aborted fetuses. It would be better to allow the discernment offered by the Holy Spirit to act while monitoring complex, new situations; such a considered discernment would permit the engagement of dialogue, ideas, and a much deeper and more sustainable well of reflection on the issues at hand. Unfortunately, the contrary impulse can often be witnessed in statements made by hierarchs and national Orthodox Church organizations, which are frequently salted with faulty factual knowledge of the issues in question.

For instance, in the case of in vitro fertilization, there remains a tendency to equate non-implanted embryos with post-natal babies. Yet, as in the case of the different treatment decisions that might be made for different cancer patients, there are vast and obvious ethical and theological differences between fertilized embryos in a laboratory and children who have been gestated and born into the world. The inattention to these critical details suggests that positions have been taken based on a rigid adherence to over-determined theological extrapolations without consideration of such pastoral concerns as care for the individual and love for others. Such apparent zeal in marking an ab-

solutist position may swell Church membership with persons who yearn for a black-and-white moral universe. Yet, while attracting members based on a robustly expressed ideology may make for a good political party, it does not create a climate of mutual support and spiritual growth within the Church. Instead of statements prepared as final pronouncements, the Church should be able to voice nuanced views with the help of a broad range of Orthodox Christians who are scholars from appropriate disciplines, theologians, or both. The Church need not take positions on any and all issues that confront us in the modern world, but often these matters affect parishioners, who are faced with making decisions about new technologies in light of conflicting information from Church leaders. Parishioners considering in vitro fertilization are confused by multiple hierarchs who provide divergent guidance about the moral and theological implications of various forms of the procedure. Such situations are likely to become even more complicated with the rapid growth and application of new technologies and new discoveries in all disciplines.

In light of the profundity and complexity of technological and social change, the Orthodox Church in North America should return to the roots of its tradition of openness in dialogue, conciliarity, and freedom of opinion. In his book *The Freedom of Morality*, Christos Yannaras describes the early Church of the Apostolic Council as the church that vindicated the inclusion of nontraditional members by honoring St. Paul's theology and rejecting legal substitutes for salvation. In his estimation, the Church thereby repelled the danger of becoming an "ethic" rooted in a specific era. In contemporary North America, there is a vogue for polarized political opinions and the rejection of discussion that could lead to changing one's mind. Orthodox Christianity, however, relies on an innate flexibility for its continued existence. It is worrisome that today's Orthodox Christians increasingly seem to embrace legalism as salvation, thus putting us in danger of reducing our Orthodox Church to a religion, an ethic, a series of ideologies that suit a particular political climate and not the universal Church. How can we recapture the spirit of openness, reflection, and sincerity that is expected of us as Orthodox Christians? We must agree to discard easy solutions to complex issues and instead develop a willingness to "work" (*leitourgia* being the common work of the people) to find ways to express an Orthodox perspective, realizing that it may require time, patience, and discernment. ✠

Dr. ***Gayle E. Woloschak*** is currently Professor of Radiation Oncology at Northwestern University in Chicago and Adjunct Professor of Religion and Science at the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, and at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She holds a PhD in Biomedical Sciences from the University of Toledo (Medical College of Ohio) and a DMin in Eastern Christian Studies from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Her laboratory interests include molecular biology, radiation biology, and nano-biotechnology, and her science-religion fields include biological evolution, stem cell research, and ecology.