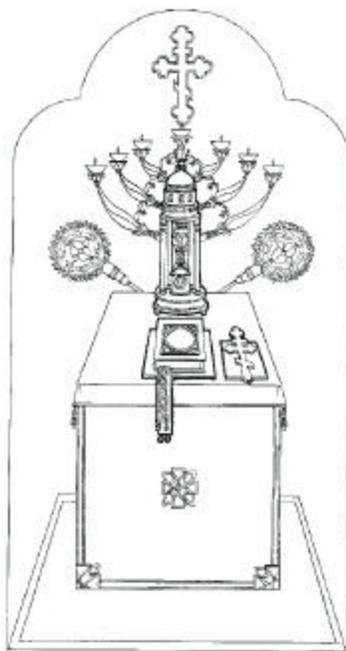


# Why *Orthodox*?

## Right Worship and the Word “Orthodox”

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**Christianity is a liturgical religion. The Church is first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second.**

*- Father Georges Florovsky*

## Why “Orthodox”?

"Orthodox" is our identity. It is not an accidental term, customarily attached to "Greek" or "Russian" or "Serbian," which means nothing apart from these ethnic adjectives. It is our name. If you rob someone of his name, you rob him of his identity. You cancel him. You erase him from your mind. Take away the "Orthodox" from "Greek Orthodox." What is left? "Greek." Socrates was Greek. Was he a Christian? The identity of a "Greek Orthodox" Christian, therefore, resides in the name "Orthodox." Take away "Orthodox" from "Russian Orthodox." Only the "Russian" remains. Lenin was Russian. Was he a Christian? The name "Orthodox," then, is the key to our identity as Christians, our true and everlasting identity in Christ. If we want to know who we are, where we come from and where we are going, we must understand precisely what "Orthodox" means. We must know our own name.

"Orthodoxy" means *right worship. We are the people who worship rightly.* Is that all? To understand all the nuances of our name, we should ask: What does "Orthodox" also mean? Does "Orthodox" with a large "O" differ from "orthodox" with a small "o"? Only then can we begin to understand what right worship actually means.

The word "Orthodox" means nothing or everything to most people in North America. In English, "orthodox" means "holding correct or currently accepted opinions" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1990.) It is an elegant euphemism for "conventional." "Orthodox" medicine contrasts with "alternative" therapies. It can mean "not independent-minded," having the rigid, submissive mind of the slave. "Orthodox" also means "authoritatively established." At its worst, it is power imposed from above; not right in itself, it makes itself "right" by force. No wonder it is a word that young people and young cultures, such as Canada and the United States, generally despise. This, of course, is "orthodox" with a small "o." Most Americans and Canadians, if you say you are "Orthodox," assume you are Jewish. They picture an elderly, bearded rabbi with a skullcap and sidelocks, dressed distinctively in black, who keeps ancient rituals strictly

in the face of our changing times. This image comes closer to the truth but it is incomplete. It is also culturally misplaced. Orthodox Jews do not call themselves "Orthodox" in Hebrew or Yiddish. The word is Greek. Greeks were never Jews. "Orthodox" is a Greek word, a Christian word, applied to Jews after the fact. It is our name, not theirs.

In dictionaries, the last definition of "Orthodox" refers to us. Like the term "Orthodox Jews," however, it limits us to a culture: the East. The *Oxford Dictionary* calls us "the Eastern Church" and suggests that we broke away from the Western Church in the 11th century. This

Western view of history raises the question: why would the West call a splinter group, which allegedly broke off from it eleven centuries after the birth of the Church, a name which the same Western culture uses to mean traditional, conventional, based on the most ancient authority? Are Orthodox Jews more modern than Reform Jews? Moreover, how can something "orthodox," that is, authoritative, be confined to the East? God is everywhere; authority in matters of God must be apply everywhere. This Western usage also ignores the obvious facts of history. Our Lord Jesus Christ was not born in Iceland. If the East is Orthodox, surely it is because the orthodox version of the Christian faith began there. Christianity spread from the Israel, the East, to the West. If a Westerner asks you what the Orthodox Church is, your best response is the obvious: it is the original Church. We are not reformed, that is, revised editions. We are not imitations. We are the real thing. Orthodox Judaism is simply the original Judaism; Orthodox Christianity is simply the original Christianity.

The facts are so obvious that we forget them. In fact, they embarrass us. In a culture where new religions are born every day, our tiny Orthodox minority is afraid to be itself. We do not want the majority to know we are here. We watch our Roman Catholic neighbours, members of an ancient faith once closely related to ours, with similar rituals, vestments, and offices, feel out of place in a culture that Protestants made. We watch

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them strip away "foreign" elements of worship, such as incense, candles, and richly embroidered vestments. We watch them win elections *only* if they play down the foreign faith that sets them apart. What makes it foreign? Rituals and vestments less foreign to a Protestant culture than ours, plus lands of origin in Southern or Eastern Europe that border on ours. If they were foreign, we are more so. So, in order to escape the prejudice that faced and faces them, we hide behind racial determinism

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as though we had no choice. If they looked strange to Protestants and we look stranger, it is only an accident of ancestry. If Orthodox means no more than Greek or Russian, it clearly stems from a foreign culture and therefore *makes no claims on this one*. "Orthodox" does not mean "orthodox." It is harmless. No one

really cares why "Greek Orthodox" uses the same word as "Orthodox Jew" or an "orthodox political opinion." We are "Orthodox" accidentally. Our claim to being the true faith, which the very word "Orthodox" obviously means, very politely disappears. In the multireligious climate of North America, where no one faith dares claim to be the only true one, the subversive word "Orthodox" loses its sting. It becomes harmlessly meaningless.

### Loss of Identity

Tragically, we disappear in our own eyes as well. We wear the mask of accident until our very features conform to the mask. We spread the lie that "Orthodox" does not mean "orthodox" until at last we believe it. Ask the average Orthodox parishioner what "Orthodox" means. He looks at you as though you were insane. Ask him what church he attends. Most likely, he will reply: "Greek Orthodox" -- totally unable, even in his own mind, to distinguish the "Orthodox" from the "Greek." Perhaps he will reply as many Russians do, who say they attend "the Russian Church" and drop the word "Orthodox" altogether. We lose our identity, almost deliberately. This ingrained habit of language produces two results: either our people leave the Church when they cease to think of themselves primarily as "Greek" or "Russian" or, more deplorably, they stay. They stay, not to worship God rightly but to worship themselves wrongly. They

stand (or probably sit) through the Divine Liturgy just in order to bite into the first piece of baklava, to taste the first spoonful of borscht. Once, in Sunday School, a boy began making fun of our Lord and the Most Holy Mother of God. The teacher told the boy's father: "Your son says he doesn't believe in God." The father replied: "Of course not. I don't believe in God either." She asked him why he came to church. He answered: "It's our Bulgarian custom." When we forget or ignore the name Orthodox, we do not wrap the icon of Christ in a national flag; we replace it. We enshrine the flag in place of the cross. Should we abandon our cultural heritage? Of course not. We should call ourselves by our rightful name: *Orthodox*.

### Words Have Meaning

Orthodoxy, the right worship, begins with *the right name*. In the original Greek, the word is made up of two elements: *ortho* and *doxa* become Orthodoxy. What does *ortho* mean? "Right, correct," or, more precisely, "straight." In Greek, words with *ortho* are common: *orthos* (upright, erect, straight), *orthios* (upright, standing), *orthographia* (spelling, orthography), *orthologismos* (rationalism), *orthotis* (rightness), *orthophrosine* (right thinking, being reasonable.) English uses *ortho* most commonly in medical terms: *orthodontics* (treatment of irregularities of the teeth and jaws), *orthopaedics* (treatment of deformities of the bones or the muscles), *orthoptics* (treatment of irregularities of the eyes, especially eye-muscles.) *Ortho* also appears in geometry, in the sense of straight: *orthogonal* (having right angles), *orthorhombic* (having three mutually perpendicular axes found in a crystal, such as in topaz.) In both of these languages, *ortho* means straight or correct. Everything that is not *ortho* is either indirect or incorrect.

The second element, *doxa*, is open to debate. Some scholars, including the staff of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, translate it as "opinion." They trace it to *dokeo*, "think, believe, suppose, consider," an act of the intellect. Combined with *ortho*, it would mean "right opinion." Orthodox believers, it seems, are those who believe the right things: those whose intellects say "yes" when God or the authorities of the Church propose a concept that they expect the faithful to accept. If so, "Orthodox" would mean "orthodox" in the most servile sense: the mind submits to an external authority, which speaks only to the mind and demands only, if categorically, that it say "two plus two equals four." Orthodoxy as "right opinion" comforts timid souls who worship authority figures. Those who worship God, it leaves unsatisfied. It is the "orthodoxy" of the philosopher and the slave; it is *not* the Orthodoxy of prayer.

### What Makes Worship Right?

"Right opinion" is yet not right worship. It does not make worship right; it results from worship, when worship is right. More likely than *dokeo*, *doxa* means what it says: *glory*. Greek authors of antiquity, from Aristotle to Josephus, use the word consistently to mean *brightness*, *splendour*, *radiance*. Our Lord, in the Gospel according to Saint Luke (24:26), uses it to describe the next life: *eiselthein eis ten doxa autou*, "enter into his glory." *Doxa* means no less than magnificence: "Solomon in all his *glory*" did not match the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:29, Luke 12:27). This is the Christian meaning. St. Paul identifies *doxa* specifically with praise, the Divine Liturgy that we, with the angels, offer unceasingly to God simply because He is God. "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be *glory* for ever. Amen" (Romans 11:36.) This is the true Orthodox meaning of *doxa*, in all its, well, *glory*. *Orthodoxia*, then, obviously means *the right (or straight) glory given to God*.

What makes this glory "right?" It approximates the glory of God in Himself. A king, such as Solomon, wears glorious robes, not to glorify himself but to signify that he reigns by the grace of God. The splendid

glory of the sun, so radiant in our Orthodox homelands of Greece, Israel, and Egypt, is too bright to look upon; all the more so, the pre-eternal Creator of heaven and earth, too bright for the mind's eye to

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## They discuss, then worship. We Orthodox worship, then discuss.

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conceive in images of this world. If the sun shines marvellously on us, who cannot look into it, so much more does God shine on us and "re-veal" Himself -- pull away the veil that shades our weak eyes, to show us the glory that He is, the glory that makes all earthly glories only shadows that He casts in the world that He creates. Orthodoxy is right glory. In

practical, tangible terms, this means *right worship*.

When God Himself was born of a Virgin, whom He raised to a height of *doxa* that only He can ever surpass, He abolished abstract glory. He tore apart that invisible wall that kept the Holy Spirit, in His glory, safely removed from flesh, bone, muscle, even wood and paint. He became the icon of our glory, no less than His own. We are no longer free to say, with the philosophers, that only the mind gives glory to God. We can no longer glory merely in an idea. That is why the idea of worship, without concrete acts and forms, is as meaningless as an abstract idea of love.

Ecumenical dialogue, the agenda of Christians whose forms of worship differ more widely than in any other faith, never asks plainly "What is the

right form of worship?" Instead, ecumenists invent new, rather dry, forms of worship based on ideas derived from theoretical consensus. They discuss, then worship. We Orthodox worship, then discuss. As we did not invent God but God revealed His glory, so we do not invent forms of worship but follow those that God reveals in the Book of Exodus, chapters 25 through 30.

## Biblical Foundations vs. Invention

Any Protestant is free to look it up. In Exodus, God lays the architectural plan still found in every Orthodox temple in the world. He describes the Orthodox altar, complete with incense, candles, and tabernacle. He describes the rich vestments that distinguish our bishops and the clergy that serve with them from the rest of the People of God. The word of God, which all Christians claim to follow, could not be more explicit: "*According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so shall you make it*" (Exodus 25:9.) Nowhere in the Gospels does Christ ever repeal this law. On the contrary, He declares: "*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled*" (Matthew 5:17-18.) If God instructed us

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explicitly in right worship before He took flesh in Jesus Christ, the Apostle and Evangelist John knows that He does not change His mind. The twenty-four elders (in Greek, *presbyterous*, hence "priests") in the last book

of the Holy Bible wear liturgical robes and crowns of gold (Revelation 4:4); they offer incense (Revelation 5:8) in front of seven golden lampstands (Revelation 1:12 -- the seven candles on the holy altar table of every Orthodox church. This is not Protestant worship, at least of the Baptist or Calvinist sort. This is Biblical worship. It is right worship.

What are the elements of right worship that God prescribes in the Bible?

**1. A sanctuary, a holy place set aside for worship** (Exodus 25:8.) To meet exclusively in private homes or forests or seashores for worship is not Biblical.

- 2. An ark, overlaid with gold, that contains the Word of God** (Exodus 25:10-11.) "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14.) The tabernacle on an Orthodox altar table contains the consecrated Body of Christ, the Word made flesh for the faithful to receive in Holy Communion. The Book of the Gospels, the icon of the Word, rests beside it.
- 3. Images of holy beings, such as angels and saints** (Exodus 25:18.) Holy icons are an integral part of right worship. The Sunday of the Holy Icons is rightly called the Sunday of Orthodoxy.
- 4. A golden lampstand with six or seven branches for candles** (Exodus 25:31-32.)
- 5. Curtains of fine, coloured cloth** (Exodus 26:1.)
- 6. A veil to divide the holiest section of the temple from the rest** (Exodus 26:31-33.) The iconostasis divides and yet does not divide the people from the altar. The holy images of Christ, His Mother, and the saints do not keep us out; they invite us in.
- 7. An altar of wood, ornately decorated** (Exodus 27.)
- 8. Priests dressed in glorious, beautiful vestments** (Exodus 25:1-2.)
- 9. A breastplate, robe, tunic, turban, and sash for the priests** (Exodus 28:4.) An Orthodox bishop wears a cross and panagia, his breastplate; an omophorion over a cassock and sakkos, his robe and tunic; a jewel-encrusted mitre, his turban; and a zone belt, his sash.
- 10. Incense** (Exodus 30:1.)
- 11. Structured prayers, historically rooted in the Book of Psalms.** Much of our Divine Liturgy, including the entire First Antiphon, comes directly from the Book of Psalms.

Orthodox Christian worship today, of course, does not correspond to the Jewish worship in the Old Covenant in every tiny detail. Christ has fulfilled the Law, as He said. These elements of liturgical worship, so foreign or even repulsive to certain Protestants, nonetheless make up Biblical worship. Any form of worship that deviates from them is not Biblical worship. It is not right worship, as the Orthodox Church defines it.

## More Than Mechanics - Much More

If right worship were limited to the right forms of worship, all would be simple. It is not. The same Law of God that prescribes such worship also condemns it, as soon as it becomes an end in itself. The Hebrew Scriptures consist of five books that describe right worship, eleven histories of failed attempts at it, six books of poetry that give it a voice, and *seventeen* books of prophets who accuse Israel of replacing right worship with lifeless forms. *Almost half* the Jewish Bible condemns a

merely mechanical worship, stripped of heart and soul. "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips," warns God, "but their heart is far from Me" (Isaiah 29:13.) Our Lord quotes this verse to the Pharisees, obsessed with correct forms, and adds: "in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:9.) From the start, the danger is present. An Orthodox priest, no less than a Jewish priest of the Temple in Jerusalem, can offer a sacrifice at the altar that is nothing more than the worship of forms. A priest can harden the smallest details of worship into a law which, in turn, hardens his heart; the very act that should move him to repentance instead leaves him unable to repent. Unfortunately for those Protestants, who quote every chapter of the Bible except Exodus 25, liturgy is *not* the commandment of men; it is the explicit commandment of God. Those hypocrites who separate forms of right worship from the spirit do not "add" anything to the commandments; they subtract. They do not do more but less. They forget that right worship is not the form alone but the person who performs it.

## The Vision of *Right Glory*

Right worship is not right unless it is the vision of right glory. That is what Orthodoxy means. To follow the correct forms prescribed in Exodus, to obey every rubric in the *Typikon* that tells priests how to serve, is empty - - indeed, a blasphemous insult to God -- if the heart is dead and only the hands move. It is a blasphemy if the priest serves with servile fear, afraid that God will punish him if he forgets a gesture or mispronounces a word. That is not right worship. That is not Orthodox. It is Orthodox only if, like a child, we look on the glory of God all around us and give thanks for His glory. Our eyes are Orthodox only if, like the eyes of a child, they open wide to see the holy icons, the rich tapestry of vestments, the light of candles that flicker in the shadows. Our ears are Orthodox only if, like the ears of a child, they delight in the ancient melodies that give wings to the words of the Fathers that have pierced the human soul for ten centuries or more. Our nose is Orthodox only if it delights in the smell of incense, as a child marvels at the sharp, fresh scent of a rare flower. Our touch is Orthodox only if we thrill to the sweep of the arm, the fingers that trace the sign of the Cross on forehead, chest, right shoulder and left, unable to grasp that God Himself died so that we could live forever. Our taste is Orthodox only if, like a child, we receive the Precious Body and Blood of our God as an infant drinks milk trustingly from its mother's breast. "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Mark 10:15.)

Right worship is Biblical worship. It is a set of rituals that we are not free to discard, if we really believe that God is real, really has revealed His will, and remains true to His word. It is the vision of an inconceivable,

invisible glory that God wills us to see and conceive. It is the taste and smell of heaven. It is the glory of limitless wonder, of pure and childlike joy.

