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**Ukrainian Orthodox Evangelism? Social science suggests we'll do well
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Introduction

One of the questions some people who are born into Orthodoxy have for adult converts is why they would choose such a demanding faith. The irony is that social science research suggests that demanding religious groups tend to grow, while those that make things easier for their adherents tend to decline. This is one of many reasons why Orthodoxy – and especially its Ukrainian expression – is ideally posed for evangelistic growth in America. In this series of essays, I describe some of these reasons and a few of the challenges that may inhibit our efforts to bring others to the One True Church.

The Costs of Orthodoxy

Even the more faithful and pious heterodox Christians react with surprise or incredulity when learning about our worship practices. The regular and often protracted periods of fasting, long, frequent services (most or all of which are spend standing), and long personal devotions and prayers are among the most obvious “costs” of being Orthodox. This sort of religious devotion requires serious commitment. It also sets us apart from other Christians and the rest of the world. Natural pious expressions such as the veneration of icons, kissing the hands of priests and bishops, making the sign of the cross, and prostrations also set us apart – such signs of humility and submission are rare outside of Orthodoxy. In addition, our faith is decidedly and unapologetically illiberal. It seems to the world to be unreasonable, intolerant, and superstitious. If you do not sense this, a short talk with a worldly colleague about our central rite – the Eucharist (e.g. what it is, what it means to us, how we prepare for it, etc.) – should convince you. The very fact that only Orthodox Christians who have prepared themselves through repentance, prayer, and fasting, may approach the chalice is offensive to many; as is the requirement that even life-long Christians go through a rigorous Catechumenate and be Baptized and/or Chrismated in order to “become Orthodox”. These rites of entrance differ greatly from the simple “altar calls” and “statements of commitment” required for membership in most heterodox Christian groups.

It is true that our faith separates us from the world. I have met well-meaning and pious Orthodox who lament this division and would prefer that our religious expressions were softened to make Orthodoxy more appealing. Sidestepping the various theological issues involved and looking at it purely in terms of evangelism, social science research suggests that such changes would be counterproductive. Social scientists describe a pattern many religious groups tend to exhibit:

1. New religious sects set themselves apart and enjoy tremendous growth
2. This growth creates several pressures to modernize
3. Modernization is followed by a decrease in qualitative and quantitative commitment (i.e. the sect stops growing and begins to shrink)

The Roman Catholic example, one of many cited in the literature, is especially useful. In addition to being (or having been) a deeply liturgical church that appeals to Tradition and Apostolic succession, the Roman Catholic church was – like ours- formed by generations of immigrants who expected their parish to help them maintain their unique cultural identities. The combination of an “old world” culture and a distinct and demanding faith kept the Roman Catholic Church strong – and helped it grow - in America. However, the Roman Catholic Church has suffered a decline in vocations, growth, and (arguably) commitment. This decline is correlated with the post-Vatican II attempts at modernization. Attempts to make Roman Catholicism more “relevant” and more modern proved to be counterproductive (if nothing else). Yes, Orthodox Christianity is counter-cultural – and sometimes it is difficult to be different. But the very things that make us different and make being Orthodox difficult actually strengthen our commitment to our Church and invigorate our evangelistic and prophetic witness to the world – especially when kept in their proper salvific context.

The Rewards of Orthodoxy: unabashedly proclaiming salvation through Christ

Author and priest’s-wife Frederica Mathewes-Green suggests that Orthodoxy is the “Marine Corps of Christianity”. The comparison is apt and useful for the present discussion. Recruits undergo a difficult process of recreation to become a Marine. They maintain a level of self-discipline that dwarfs the other services. One of the reasons this is demanded of them is that it will make them more effective soldiers – better able to implement the will of their commander. Another reason is that a well-disciplined Marine is more likely to keep himself and those around him alive through dangerous missions. In other words, Marines train and live the way they do because what they do is important, and it is essential that they do it well. The parallels to Orthodoxy are clear – our asceticism is driven by our desire to serve God and to work towards the salvation of ourselves and those around us. Our conviction that Christ is our only hope, that He established the Church and instituted the sacred mysteries as The Way to achieve perfection and entrance into eternal life. We also believe that denying Christ and spurning His gifts invite our condemnation.

We proclaim these and related truths without reservation. As with our way of life, our message (Christ crucified) sets us clearly apart from the rest of the world: it remains “to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1: 23) – and to many Americans it appears intolerant, hateful, and unenlightened. The tension between the Good News and the morality of our world creates temptations to soften it and make it more relevant. After all, if we want people to come to Christ through His Church, you can’t have them thinking that the Orthodox are mean-spirited fools, right? What kind of witness would that be? What kind of witness indeed. There are many important reasons why we should not play down the economy of salvation – but the ironic thing is that even the reasons that seem “good” aren’t. In the next installment of this essay, I will delve more deeply into the social scientific literature to describe the various factors researchers have found to be correlated with growth, along with their underlying psychological and sociological mechanisms. I think you will find the implications for Orthodox evangelism striking. I did.

In this section, Fr. Dn. Anthony continues his essay “Ukrainian Orthodox Evangelism? Social science Suggests we’ll do well”.

Rationality and religion

One theme in the literature on the sociology of religion is the use of economic reasoning to explain religious behavior. Unlike most other sociological traditions, this one assumes that religious behavior is largely rational. People join religious movements because they provide plausible mechanisms for them to obtain resources that are scarce or otherwise unobtainable (e.g. salvation, immortality). Within this “religious economy” literature, these mechanisms are referred to as “compensators”. When people decide which (if any) religion to commit to, the assumption is that they do so using the same criteria as when they make most of their other decisions: the weight the expected costs and benefits and choose the one that will leave them best off (i.e. they “maximize their expected utility”). To be more specific, they weigh the awesome rewards offered by religious groups against both 1) the costs involved in meeting each of the group’s demands and requirements and 2) the probability (i.e. “risk”) that the promised reward will not be obtained.

If you have been reading carefully, you must be wondering how I claim that sociology suggests that Orthodoxy is poised for growth. After all, the rewards Orthodoxy offers are similar to those offered by other Christian groups – but Orthodoxy demands more than most. As a result, all this seems to predict growth among those religious groups that promise much, but demand little, accommodating themselves as closely as possible to the surrounding culture. But wait... there’s more: **Orthodoxy, through its historical consistency, the witness of its confessors and martyrs, and its high barriers to entry and exit, increases the subjective probability that it can deliver on its promises** (I say “subjective” because this is social science – it measure perception, not reality) vis-à-vis heterodox (and especially mainstream) confessions. Ironically, because individuals look to others to help them determine risk, the high demands of our faith – or to be more accurate, the fact that many good, sane, and trustworthy people are willing to accept high demands – actually make Orthodoxy more attractive. The “cloud of witnesses” (which is comprised in part of martyrs and confessors) provides additional reassurance that the Church can deliver on her promises. Of course such testimonials cannot prove the veracity of Christian claims, but I still find it interesting that sociologists recognize the (psychological) utility of having strong witnesses. Once again, “doing the right thing” is good for business!

Specific things that seem to cause growth

In this section, I present some of the specific things that have historically been correlated with growth within religious groups and provide brief comments relating them to our situation. I encourage you to do the same. These examples were taken primarily from *The Churching of America* and *The Rise of Christianity*.

- **Inspiring and sanctifying non-secular message, with emphases on personal renewal/sanctification and morality.** Our parish is blessed to have a priest that delivers such edifying and salvific homilies (all glory to God!). More importantly Orthodoxy – with its message of salvation and theosis through Christ and His sacraments – hits the big home run on this one!

- **A national organization to protect the individual parishes from external pressures** (both cultural and religious). The Orthodox Church – with its episcopal/conciliar structure comprised entirely of monks - does this naturally. In addition to having a national episcopacy, our Church (the UOC of the USA) has the added “bonus” of being a diocese of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.
- **High barriers for entry and exit, and a concomitant level of “tension” with the outside world.** To recapitulate the point I made in the previous installment of this essay, Orthodoxy requires substantial commitment from her catechumens and members. On a side note, religious movements that demand a great deal of their members have less of a problem with “free riders”. It seems that the best way for religious movements to deal with variable commitment is to expect a lot from everyone.
- **Clergy that relate to and remain a part of the laity/”people of God”** (vs. the creation of a professional and academic priestly class). There is a great temptation for us to treat our priests as “employees” – and a concomitant temptation for priests to set themselves apart from us (e.g. to see themselves as academic theologians, lecturers, social/political activists, or as contract employees of the parish).
- **Related to the above is the provision of practical clerical education** (e.g. liturgical and homiletic vs. academic). One of the indicators that a religious movement is losing momentum is that it begins to utilize an academic model of education for its clergy. This is a very important point. Interestingly, it turns what some consider to be a liability – our Church’s lack of an accredited seminary – into an asset. Personally, I think it is great that we rely on a combination of “on the job training”, the St. Stephen’s Program, and our own (very practical) St. Sophia’s Seminary Post-Deaconate program to train our priests.
- **Strong vocations and a surplus of available/potential clergy.** It is interesting to note that circuit riding is a strong mechanism for growth as long as the local parishes are strong – but may not be so good when each is in the process of dying away. Our Church is blessed with an increased number of “late vocations”, but as Fr. Stephen reminds us in his regular column on vocations in practically every issue of the Ukrainian Orthodox Word, we need to work to increase vocations. It is certainly true that we need to encourage and seek out those with a calling to the priesthood, but it is equally vital that we encourage, train, and empower those called to serve as music leaders, kitchen coordinators, altar servers and captains, teachers, and in all the other ministries of our Church. The need for trained music leaders is particular necessary for growth and the planting of new missions.
- **Empowered laity and multiple ways for people to contribute.** This is one of the areas where Ukrainian Orthodoxy is historically strong. For instance, the UOL is a living continuation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Brotherhoods of yore. From its reflowering in the early 20th century, the UOC has been committed to a restored role for the laity (a.k.a. “conciliarity”). On a related note, the UOC has learned from difficult experience the pain caused by both laity acquiescence and hyperinvolvement. As such, the UOC may be more likely than other Churches to maintain a healthy and appropriate balance. Our continued commitment and

submission to the Ecumenical Patriarchate demonstrates our commitment to this balance.

- **Low overhead, allowing for the viability of small groups.** I reckon this could be a silver lining of poor (and often reprehensible) clergy compensation. Unfortunately, we probably do pretty well on this one. While we should not set up our priests as idols/emblems of our glory by paying them exorbitant salaries, neither should we impose martyrdom on them and their families. The willingness of our priests to work outside the parish demonstrates their commitment to Christ and His Church. It is also a model that can facilitate growth. On the other hand, it can become a crutch that supports poor stewardship and evangelism.
- **Secondary organizations** (e.g. clubs, service organizations, media outlets) **to reinforce the religious culture.** In addition to the UOL, the Jr UOL, and various local brotherhoods and sisterhoods, we are blessed to have a growing Orthodox media presence (I am listening to www.ancientfaithradio.com right now on my stereo - I strongly recommend it). These secondary organizations form the “trenches” that allow us to live safely as Christians on the front lines of the spiritual war.
- **Take advantage of mixed marriages** (and other social networks) Religious movements grow primarily through the penetration of social networks more than through marketing. Research suggests that in mixed marriages, the spouse with the least commitment (or involved in the least demanding faith, if the commitments are roughly equal) tends to convert to the confession of the spouse with the most. I recently heard an Orthodox commentator claim that 90% of Orthodox marriages in America are mixed. This seems a bit high, but it could be a great vehicle for growth (it could also be a disaster if we don't raise committed children). The overall point that the church grows through the exploitation of social networks reinforces the traditional method of Orthodox evangelism: we grow the Church best by simply being Christian.
- **Allow for local variations to match local conditions.** Broadly speaking, this is one of the historical strengths of Orthodox Christianity. For example, one of the first things missionaries tend to do is translate educational and liturgical materials into the local language. Here in the USA, our bishops are mission-minded and are very supportive of our efforts to reach out to all cultures. There are also a few things inherent to Ukrainian Orthodoxy that will make it attractive to Americans. These include:
 - **A strong tradition of incorporating popular religious hymns into worship and festivals.** Americans love their hymns. Incorporating pious hymns allowed for the creation and expression of a vibrant Ukrainian Orthodox culture. It can do the same for American Orthodoxy.
 - **Laity involvement/empowerment.** Ukrainian Orthodoxy is not “democratic”, but it can channel our democratic inclinations in a healthy direction.
 - **A bright, joyful, and celebratory religious culture.** Many Americans will be attracted to the joyful pattern of Ukrainian religious life. This pattern can provide a healthy expression for American religious

enthusiasm and optimism. Of course many Americans will be attracted to and nourished by our solemn “monastic” side, as well.

Conclusion: why we should do it

Christians should be guided by Sacred Tradition and the Holy Spirit rather than the results of scientific investigation, and we should be careful about accepting the results of a politicized and secular (and largely atheist) discipline like sociology. Having said that, I think the results described above are interesting and worth considering. Not only is the research behind it pretty rigorous, but the findings provide some useful insights.

We do not rely on scientific “evidence” to confirm or somehow reinforce our faith, but neither should we be surprised when science matches our expectations. For instance, a popular American magazine recently claimed to have found the part of the brain associated with prayer and devotion. Some scientists used this to confirm their own atheism – and probably hoped that it would undermine the faith of believers. Personally, I was not surprised. Orthodox Christians expect to see the hand of God in all of creation. We should never try to separate physical and spiritual reality – they are part of a single gift of God. The Lord gave me a mouth to sing His praises- why not a certain part of my brain to help me pray? Similarly, I am not surprised when social scientific evidence suggests that following the established disciplines of Orthodoxy has certain positive effects on the organizational strength and evangelism of the Church. I am not suggesting that we should follow Holy Tradition because it helps our bottom line - we follow Tradition because we want what God wants for us. But, at the very least, these findings should help gird those who might otherwise believe that softening the disciplines of our Church would make Orthodoxy more attractive to lukewarm believers and potential converts: the truth is that we provide the most effective witness when we do as St. Paul instructed us; “O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen.” (1 Timothy 6: 20-21)

In the next issue, I will demonstrate the utility and limitations of the rational choice approach to religion using the conversion of one of our greatest leaders and saints, St. Volodymyr, as an example.

Further reading

- Roger Fink and Rodney Stark (1993) *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*.
- Ted Jalen (ed) (2002) *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*.
- Rodney Stark (1997) *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. The hardback version is called *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. This book was written for general consumption. It is the most readable of the whole lot.
- Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000) *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*.
- Lawrence A. Young (ed) (1997) *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment*.