Smells and bells: Turning to Orthodoxy

by Amy Frykholm in the December 28, 2004 issue

On the third day of Easter, I stood in front of the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Kiev, Ukraine. With me was a prominent scholar of American religion who was visiting Eastern Europe for the first time. We were watching a priest and his flock process around the cathedral with icons, incense and crosses. “Have you heard that more Americans are becoming Orthodox?” she asked me, smirking slightly. “Smells and bells. One more way to have someone tell you what to do and what to think.”

Her remarks touched on a question of increasing importance in American Christianity. With trends toward mega-churches and worship as entertainment, and with heated debates in some denominations about the ordination of homosexuals, American Christianity seems to be moving in a less orthodox rather than a more orthodox direction. In the United States, Eastern Orthodox Christianity remains a very small religious group (just 1.3 percent of the population). To many American Christians, Orthodoxy is an obscure and foreign type of religion.

But the observation of the visiting scholar was not incorrect. The past several decades have seen an increase in conversions to Orthodoxy in the U.S. Frederica Mathewes-Green writes that nearly half the students in Orthodoxy’s two largest American seminaries—Holy Cross and St. Vladimir’s—are converts. The number of Antiochian Orthodox churches in the U.S. has doubled—to over 250 parishes and missions—in 20 years. The Antiochian Church, unlike most Orthodox organizations in the U.S., has committed itself to seeking converts in North America and sees itself “on a mission to bring America to the ancient Orthodox Christian faith.” The missions organization of this branch of Orthodoxy estimates that 80 percent of its converts come from evangelical and charismatic orientations, with 20 percent coming from mainline denominations.

In 1987, Peter Gillquist, a former leader in Campus Crusade for Christ, and 200 others in a single evangelical congregation made national headlines when they were

chrismated (or confirmed) into the Antiochian Orthodox Church. In the ensuing years a slow trickle of converts has followed them. Daniel Clendenin suggests that while Orthodoxy may be too small to have an effect on American religion as a whole, conversions may be having a “seismic impact” on the way the faith is practiced in the U.S. In the context of American Christianity, Orthodoxy may seem archaic and irrelevant. Yet it has a strong appeal to many. The question is: why? Is it exoticism, as my colleague suggested? Is it a desire for stability in the midst of rapid culture change? Are conversions a form of protest or, as Gillquist writes, a form of homecoming?

In order to answer these questions, I decided to sit down with some converts and listen to their stories. What I learned is that converts find in Orthodoxy an antidote to American Christianity’s individualism and commercialism. While some of them seem to be reinventing Orthodoxy in America’s image, others are struggling to reinvent themselves in Orthodoxy’s image. This contrast can be striking.

In central Colorado, far from the traditional centers of Orthodoxy in Constantinople, Moscow and Mount Athos, is a small monastery where five monks live together on the sagebrush foothills of the Buffalo Range. Their abbot, Archbishop Gregory, is a renowned iconographer and something of a renegade. The denomination to which he belongs, the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church (ROAC), is not in communion with most other Orthodox, who it claims have strayed from the true faith via the evils of “ecumenism.” Archbishop Gregory has joined and left several different groups on the fringes of Orthodoxy, and the Colorado monastery itself has changed hands more than once.

Brother John is a young monk who joined the monastery during his years at Trinity University in San Antonio. A former Presbyterian, Brother John recounted to me his early dismay at the liberalism he saw in the Presbyterian Church. He felt that the church was in “open denial of Christ and the apostles” and not adhering to biblical principles, and had been corrupted through accommodation to the world. At the end of his first year of college, he was seeking to be baptized into the Orthodox Church. Not only had he found the Bible-adhering church he sought, but he was also convinced that it was the one holy church founded by Christ and the apostles.

Most Orthodox churches do not rebaptize converts from other Christian denominations since the Orthodox teach that baptism is a one-time-only sacrament. Those who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit need

only to be chrismated—anointed—to be received fully into the church. But Brother John felt that his baptism as a Presbyterian was not truly a baptism. His local priest in the Orthodox Church of America (OCA) refused to baptize him, and he grew frustrated. Much in the OCA seemed impure and wayward to him, and he began to look into groups farther from the Orthodox mainstream. His search for greater purity ended in an encounter with then Archimandrite Gregory in the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church. The leaders of the ROAC consider the Russian Orthodox Church to be apostate and have broken communion with all those whom they consider "ecumenical."

Brother John gave me a tour of the monastery grounds, including the recently built Byzantine-style church, which looked at home on the rocky hills. The walls of the church were covered with the strikingly clear and sparse iconography of Archbishop Gregory. Later, as Brother John walked me to my car, he said quietly, "American Christians need to understand that they are not where they need to be. God wants them in the Orthodox Church. All of the other churches and religions are not being fully faithful to Christ."

Although he was adamantly countercultural in his approach, something of Brother John's version of Orthodoxy struck me as distinctly American. In a search for the utmost purity, he had to link up with the smallest possible unit of religious organization he could find. Like many Americans of other denominations and generations, he had to become an outsider in order to assure himself that his faith was genuine.

John is similar to other converts to Orthodoxy in that he diagnoses two distinct problems in contemporary American Christianity. One is the turn toward theological and social liberalism; the other is an entertainment-oriented, self-indulgent style of worship. These two issues sometimes draw different kinds of converts, but they are often equated with one root problem: individualism. Doctrine, practice, sacrament and worship are all suited to the needs and desires of the self.

Converts are sometimes eager to point out that Orthodoxy, because of its emphasis on continuity, cannot be "liberal." One woman, a former Baptist who had an evangelical glint in her eye, rushed to tell me that the Orthodox did not and would not ordain women and homosexuals and had always stood against abortion. For her, these seemed to be markers of authentic Christianity, and she appreciated being able to feel confident that her church would not have to struggle with these issues.

Mathewes-Green, a strong a spokesperson for Orthodoxy, has said that Orthodoxy is incompatible with feminism, and she has declared herself “twice-liberated,” the second time from a feminism she has decided is a lie.

The word “orthodoxy” is sometimes translated from the Greek to mean “right belief.” When converts emphasize belief they sometimes come up with hardline political views. But orthodoxy can also be translated as “right praise” or “right worship,” and here a different emphasis comes into view: opposition to entertainment-driven worship—what one convert calls “McChurch.” Converts speak of growing tired of a refashioned Christianity that seems at the mercy of each passing fad. Entering Orthodoxy, converts repeat, is not reinventing the church to suit oneself, but reinventing the self to join the church. “I think of myself as grafting to the tree of the church,” convert Mark Montague says. “I see that this is a process that will take my whole lifetime, and not my lifetime alone, but maybe several generations.”

When Mark and his wife, Laura, married in an Orthodox Church in 1998, some non-Orthodox friends felt uncomfortable that the ceremony contained a reading from Ephesians 5, in which submission and obedience were urged upon Laura. But Laura argued, “Why should I ask the church to change its words for me? Who am I to assume that I know more than the accumulated wisdom of the church?”

Though many Americans would no doubt find it alien or even unsettling, the anti-individualistic experience provided by Orthodoxy can be profoundly world-expanding and eye-opening. Converting to Orthodoxy means coming into spiritual contact with 350 million Orthodox believers worldwide, from countries as diverse as Syria and Ethiopia. Orthodoxy in the United States was once made up of closed-off cultural enclaves, but this is changing. Due to both immigration patterns and conversions, parishes outside big cities are becoming increasingly diverse. Many converts join churches where they learn to speak and pray in other languages. When the doors to other cultures open, so do the doors to different ways of thinking of and practicing the faith.

Father John is the parish priest of St. Herman of Alaska (OCA) in Littleton, Colorado. After a youth filled with drug use and drinking in Texas, Father John said, “I cried out to Christ to give me another life.” He smiled as he added, “And he did.”

After attending the Institute for Creation Research in San Diego and Dallas Theological Seminary, he served as youth minister at a large Baptist church in San Diego and taught science at the affiliated Christian high school. Over several years he became interested in Orthodoxy, drawn to its liturgy and rich history. He pursued this interest as a hobby only, until one day he was confronted by the principal of his school. The principal presented him with a list of what he thought were Orthodox tenets. “Do you worship icons? Do you believe that Mary never died?” Father John tried to explain his beliefs, but he was told to collect his things and never return. He was banned from the high school and the church as an “idolater.”

Two months after losing his livelihood, he and his family were chrismated into the Orthodox Church of America. “I don’t want this to sound arrogant,” he said. “I feel like we plumbed the depths of evangelicalism. We went as deep into it as we could go. We found the limits of it, and those limits became walls. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, is endless. It is like a vast ocean. How deep into it do you want to go? How holy do you want to be?”

One answer to Father John’s rhetorical questions can perhaps be found at the Brotherhood of St. George monastery in downtown Denver. Nothing I had seen in Orthodoxy in the U.S. prepared me for a meeting with Father Christodoulos, the sole monk of this outpost of the Greek Orthodox Church. Three days a week at 7 a.m., a few people gather at the monastery for the divine liturgy. Answering the monastery phone only the day before, Father Christodoulos had invited me to attend the liturgy and then to join the group for breakfast, where I would be free to ask him questions.

After the liturgy, the cantor, a woman in her 50s named Anna, prepared a breakfast of fruit, almonds and toast. I asked two young men—the only others who attended the liturgy that morning—who they were and why they came. Both were recent converts to Orthodoxy, one from Catholicism and the other from evangelicalism. Mike, a computer programmer, was preparing for his chrismation the following Monday. Jason, a college student at a local evangelical college, said that the appeal of Orthodoxy could be easily summarized: it embodied “the truth.” Anna said little. She and I carried breakfast to a table outside where Father Christodoulos was already sitting in the sunshine.

Father Christodoulos greeted us with a warm smile, but he too was quiet while the two young men talked about the upcoming chrismation, Mike’s work and their parishes in different parts of the city. Finally, Mike turned to the monk. “Father, did

you get a chance to listen to those CDs I lent you?" Father Christodoulos remained quiet for several seconds. At last he said, "My mind is still on the liturgy. I haven't fully come back yet." Then he paused again and in his voice was gentle instruction. "The liturgy is heaven on earth. Paradise on earth. Maybe we shouldn't move beyond it so quickly to mundane things. Maybe we should take time to savor it."

An American by birth, Father Christodoulos spent many years in a monastery on the island of Rhodes in Greece. Three years ago, he was asked by his bishop to start a monastery in Denver. The monk's manner exuded gentleness and humility. During our conversation, his face often lit up with delight. When I told him that I was a member of St. George Episcopal Church in Leadville, his eyes sparkled. "St. George! Oh, I am sure that is a wonderful place, filled with grace. St. George has so much grace. He was tortured for seven days, you know, and did not renounce Christ. Truly he is filled with the mercy of God." He refused to answer my question about his own conversion to Orthodoxy. "We are all converts," he said. "Each of us."

Father Christodoulos's manner was profoundly welcoming, and the hospitality that he offered me was central to the work of his life. "A monk's life is two things: prayer and hospitality. In the first we try to fulfill the commandment to love God, and in the second we try to fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves." Clearly I was not alone in feeling the draw of the monastery. As we talked, several people came in and joined our circle. Father Christodoulos radiated a welcome to all of them.

"What is the purpose of an Orthodox monastery in Denver?" I asked. "What does Orthodox monastic life bring to American culture?"

The monk's answer contained none of the critique of American culture, religion or life that had been so prevalent in conversations with other converts to Orthodoxy. "I don't like to think of myself as bringing anything to American culture. I simply have been asked by my bishop to come here and live as a witness to Christ. I would live this life if I were in Greece. I live it here. People come. The Holy Spirit moves them, and that is enough. We have tried to build an oasis of prayer here."

Moved by the simplicity and openness of the monk's faith, I decided to run the "smells and bells" theory of conversion by him, and he smiled. "Indeed, in our worship we offer something for each person. If someone comes and is moved by the beauty of the church, the beauty expressed in icons, that is good. If someone comes

and is moved by the ancient rhythms of the music, that is also good. If the rich smell of the church, the holy smell of incense that sets the church apart, touches someone, that too is good. I suppose I would say respectfully that it is indeed the smells and bells. These are the qualities of our worship, and it is in our worship that you may discover everything that is central to Orthodoxy."

When Anna and I went back to the kitchen to do the breakfast clean-up and put on another pot of coffee for the arriving guests, she confirmed what Father Christodoulos had said. She had been attending Cherry Hills Community Church in Denver, an evangelical Presbyterian congregation of more than 5,000, when she and her husband became acquainted with Orthodoxy. After her first experience with its liturgy, she was astounded. "I don't know what this is," she told her husband. "But I know I have to come back." Sometime afterward, she converted to Orthodoxy. Her life, she said, is softening as she learns to bend it to the rhythms of the liturgy.

My experience at the Brotherhood of St. George was enticing. But though I was appreciative of Orthodoxy's rich acknowledgment of mystery, I also wondered why its social life needed to be so rigidly ordered. Why, for example, did Anna and I wait on the men at the monastery? Why are feminist voices often so roundly rejected by the Orthodox Church? If the Holy Spirit is a living presence in Orthodoxy, then why were social questions of enormous complexity—abortion, feminism and homosexuality, to name a few of the most controversial—treated with such dismissive certainty by many of the converts I met? While I value historical roots and the search for answers within the church's rich past, I wonder why, in contemporary Orthodoxy in the United States, those answers are so easy to come by. Orthodox converts told me that they find comfort in the stability of the church, that positions on issues such as homosexuality and abortion have already been decided and will not change any time soon. But are answers preferred to compassion or the living work of the Spirit? By settling readily on answers to social questions, do converts embrace Orthodoxy as another form of fundamentalism?

Orthodox converts in the U.S. seek many things: stability, mystery, majesty, integrity, historical roots and authenticity. They become Orthodox both because of the hard rock they call truth and because of a taste that lingers after experiencing the liturgy. Some seek to transform American Christianity; others seek to escape it. And still others find in Orthodoxy an incarnate yet timeless witness to the gospel. What impact Orthodox Christianity may yet have on the U.S. is uncertain, but for many converts this is not the crucial question. The crucial question is what impact

Orthodoxy may have on them.