

## GETTING DOWN TO THE REAL ISSUE

by Joseph Bragg

In all the controversy between the traditional Orthodox Christians\* and "World Orthodoxy" today, it is very easy to get lost in all the arguments, canons, quotes, proofs and counter-proofs coming from both sides. We can easily get caught up in the controversy and lose sight of what the real issue is that lies behind it all. In the final analysis the controversy is not about who has the most canons or the most quotes from the Fathers or how this Father or that Bishop or this Saint responded to this or that controversy at some particular time.

If we peel back the layers of controversial years and endless arguments at the very heart of the matter, we will see a battle for a true concept and understanding of God and our Salvation. Hasn't this been the essence of all heresy debates and controversies in the Church? It is always a battle for the truth about God and our Salvation.

All the changes that have come about in World Orthodoxy have come gradually, in small increments, over many years. This makes it hard to see where you once were and where you now are. It keeps people from seeing the giant leap and profound changes that all of these incremental changes can have on our very concept of who God is and what it means to be a Christian.

We have seen similar developments in the world. Think, for example, how society thirty years ago viewed people living together before marriage,

---

\*Those Orthodox Christians that follow the Patristic (Julian) Calendar and consider ecumenism as a condemned heresy.

having children out of wedlock or being homosexual. These things were taboo and people who did these things were actually embarrassed and tried to keep them hidden. But now, today, there is no shame and in fact, these things may even have a certain badge of honor associated with them. The consequence is that society today has a very different understanding and perception of marriage, child bearing and sexuality than it did thirty years ago. The sacredness, holiness, beauty and God-ordained meaning and purpose of life, sexuality and procreation have been all but lost. These have become foreign concepts in the mind of modern society when it thinks of these subjects. Try to talk about this with many today and they will look at you as though you are speaking a foreign language.

But how did this happen: One small increment at a time over many years. While it was happening everyone just thought that a few changes were taking place here and there that didn't amount to much. What they did not understand was that the very concepts of marriage, life, procreation, and sexuality were being redefined and the very concepts of Divine purpose and meaning and the Sacred were all being lost.

My dad was born in 1891. He lived from the horse and buggy days to the landing on the moon. He died in 1978. He used to tell me that when he was a young man all the women wore below the ankle length dresses and if a woman's ankle somehow got exposed she was embarrassed and ashamed. Now, he was seeing women in shorts, pants and bathing suits. How did this happen: One small increment at a time over many years. First the dress was shortened to calf length. Then when society became used to that, it was shortened to the knee. Then it was no longer a full dress but a tight skirt. Then when society adapted to that, well you know

the rest of the story. Complete nudity is fully acceptable today and the knowledge of God and the Sacred in regard to life and living is lost.

Here is another illustration of how external changes result in the loss of internal knowledge and basic concepts and beliefs. I work with a group of people who are very religious. Most of them are from the mega church/non-denominational preference with a couple of Roman Catholics, some Church of Christ and a Baptist or two. The other day one of them mentioned the Rockettes were in town for the annual Christmas show. I mentioned that the Rockettes, dancing and strutting on stage in mini skirts, seemed to me to be totally incongruous with the celebration of the holy and sacred birth of the holy Lamb of God who came to make us holy. There were two immediate reactions. One was a look of "what in the world are you talking about?" and the other was an immediate defense of the show contending they saw nothing incongruous about it at all since it was all just a joyous celebration of Christmas. Dancing girls, strutting in mini-skirts seemed a perfectly fine way to celebrate the birth of Christ for some.

How can this be? Many changes over many years in the protestant world have resulted in very different understandings and perceptions of God and Salvation. As I listened to the responses it suddenly dawned on me that there was no way we would be able to discuss this issue in any meaningful way because we were coming from two very different concepts of God and Salvation. They had little or no concept of the holiness of God and no concept of the meaning of Salvation as *theosis* (a transformation which dies to the sinful passions and strives to attain the likeness of Christ through union with Christ).

Much of Protestantism, through many years of changes, fads and remaking has now a God who is secularized, modernized, materialized

and consumerized. The sad thing is that my co-workers do not know that the concept and perception they have of God and Salvation bears only a faint resemblance to the God and Salvation of the historic Christian faith. Consequently, they can see nothing incongruent with dancing girls in miniskirts celebrating the birth of Christ. More conversation with my co-workers revealed almost a total disconnect between faith in Christ (as they understand it) and how they think, spend their time, and live their lives. Life for them is essentially a pursuit of happiness, pleasure, self-indulgence and entertainment, and because of their views about God and Salvation, they see no disconnect. For most of them, even their Church services and activities are expressions of pride, vanity and entertainment. Again, they see no incongruity with this and the worship of the All-Holy Trinity (actually, the very concept of the All-Holy Trinity no longer exists in their religion).

Consequently, they all love watching all the latest TV shows that are dedicated to promiscuity and immorality and discussing them at work each day. For them there is no concept of self-denial or consecration for the sake of fleeing the sinful passions and being united to the Saviour. When I try to talk about any of these issues with them it is like I am speaking a foreign language to them. Their concept of God and Salvation is a world apart from mine.

What is the point: Back to the traditional Orthodox Christians vs World Orthodoxy. It is my contention that what has happened in Protestantism over many years of changes has resulted in a loss of the knowledge of God and Salvation is also happening in World Orthodoxy.

It is not just about a change of calendar, the loss of priestly beards and *rassos*, *Hafli's* on Saturday nights with Holy Communion a few hours

later, worldly and secular bishops who were never monastics and the loss of Confession and Fasting. Nor is it merely about joint prayers with non-Orthodox, Masonic memberships or membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and National Council of Churches (NCC). In the final analysis it is about retaining or losing the knowledge of God and our Salvation.

Little by little over the years, World Orthodoxy has been gradually losing a conscious sensitivity to and awareness of the holiness of God, the Sacred and Salvation as *theosis*, much the same as has happened in Roman Catholicism, Episcopalianism and Protestantism. The average, typical World Orthodox parish is secularized, socialized and consumerized. To be sure, some of the externals of Orthodoxy remain, but the heart and soul of the Orthodox faith is lost, hardly known and barely desired. The awareness and knowledge of the holiness of God and the Sacred and the pursuit of Salvation as *theosis* exists only in small pockets here and there where a priest or some of the laity have maintained contact with the traditional Orthodox Christians through their publications or their monasteries. Where this does not exist in World Orthodoxy, the true knowledge of God and of Salvation is being replaced by a new, convenient and user-friendly God and Salvation. While the externals may appear to be Orthodox, the basic knowledge and concepts are not the same. Each passing year and each successive change enlarges the gap between the faith of the traditional Orthodox Christians and World Orthodoxy. Eventually, a generation will grow up in World Orthodoxy thinking they hold the Orthodox Faith when in fact the heart and soul was lost long ago. Or has it already happened?

It is my contention that only in the traditional Orthodox Christian churches (not just those who follow the Julian calendar but those who hold the True Faith) is it possible for the true knowledge of God and of Salvation to be preserved. Only there will future generations be able to experience the true knowledge of God and Salvation as *theosis* in a living and real way beyond mere words. This is what is really at stake.

It seems to me that once we are able to see this as the real issue, there remains little to argue about.