

Orthodoxy in Britain today –
from
«landlocked» / territorial
to
«portable» religious identity

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About the terms used

- Territorial identity and portable identity
- David Martin, “*What I Really Said about Secularisation*”, 2007:
“landlocked” / “portable identities”

“territory-bound religious identity”

vs

“portable religious identity”

- D. Martin: “*the religion of a people in a territory*” vs. “*religion of portable identities, crossing borders through global mobility and communication, creating imagined communities*” (imagined communities).

Why two types of identity?

- A “minority-context” at the level of religious identity (migration, conversion, deep societal secularisation), raises 3 acute questions:
 - **Why?**
 - Why do I go to church? Why do (should) I pray? Why am I Orthodox (and not something else – or nothing)?
 - **Who am I? (individually and as a group)**
 - What does it mean to be Orthodox? (British Orthodox, Romanian, Greek, Russian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian etc?)
 - What defines me as Orthodox? (what defines / constitutes my Orthodoxy?)
 - **“IS IT TRUE?”***
 - All that I have been told about God, about faith, about the Church, about Jesus Christ?

The Orthodox diaspora = the diaspora of acute questions

- Metropolitan Anthony Bloom
- St Maria of Paris (Skobtsova)
- St Sophrony of Essex
- (Metropolitan Kallistos Ware)
 - All of them are trying to reconcile and translate in accessible terms to others like them the tension between their Orthodox identity before "conversion" (before a migrant or itinerant experience) and after.

The Orthodox diaspora = the diaspora of acute questions

- **Metrop. Anthony:** The Church has become a place of refuge where we come to be protected (by God), isolated from the secular world; a place where we run away from the life and challenges of the world
 - We take refuge in Church and we become spectators to “the life of the world”. But by doing so, we also become spectators to “the life of Christ”, to his crucifixion, death and Resurrection. We turn into “interested listeners”, who are fundamentally passive.
 - **“Our vocation is to be on earth an extension, in time and space, of the incarnate presence of Christ”** (Fr S. Bulgakov).
 - Our vocation is to go out into the world from the “safe space” of the Church.
 - (Churchianity vs Christianity, M. Anthony Bloom, SVP, 2017)
- **WHAT KIND OF CHURCH ARE WE?**

The Orthodox diaspora = the diaspora of acute questions

- **St Maria Skobtsova**: in the Orthodox Church, our orientation, our way of life, our decisions (and decision-making process) are predominantly:
- “everything is channelled towards conservation, to the preservation of the foundations, to the repetition of feelings, words, gestures”. (Synodal piety)

But the context of her life (migration, minority, war, secular state, etc.) makes her affirm that we must reach the realisation that:

- “life today incessantly demands from us such a manifestation of *creativity* that no grouping which lacks a creative agenda can possibly hope to provide.” (in Types of Religious Life)

- **HOW DO WE LIVE THE GOSPEL CONTEXTUALLY/ PRACTICALLY?**

The Orthodox diaspora = the diaspora of acute questions

- **St Sophrony of Essex:** Established a monastery with a mixed community (for theological reasons – St Silouan, but also for practical and reasons)
- The rule of the monastery is different from the traditional one found in other Orthodox monasteries
- The community is multi-ethnic (12 ethnicities / nationalities)
- “People tell me: “It is impossible to overcome nationalism in oneself.” But then, I think, salvation is impossible. If I am a nationalist and Christian by faith, then I narrow Christ down to this concept – “nationality.” You see why it is impossible for me to accept this narrowing down and why it is a great consolation for me that, although we are a small group, we are eleven nationalities!”.
- (4 Dec 1989, audio recording
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oWkmsl8HKY>) – Fr R Noica, Cuvantari duhovnicesti vol 1)
- **Universality of Orthodoxy: How can Orthodoxy (in its monastic expression) be plural – in a plural context?**

- A portable identity is attentive to and rooted in the present but it is radically oriented towards the future. It has a creative openness which involves a great degree of risk and vulnerability.
- A territorial identity is attentive to and rooted in the present but it is oriented towards the past, which it tries to re-enact, re-actualise in the present, in order to ensure that the future resembles it (the past).

Identity circumscribed to a territory

- Example Romania (but you can assign any country here)
- Orthodoxy as identity circumscribed to a territory is:
 - The majority faith
 - In a stable and historic relationship with the State
 - The dominant religion (ecumenically)
 - In an Orthodox societal space = Orthodoxy informs and influences the socio-cultural rapport and dynamic
 - The keeper (reservoir) of national, ethnic, identity and of traditional values
 - The implicit (default) (organic) option
 - Which does not automatically makes it the “voluntary” option

Portable identity

- In the West (GB), Orthodoxy is:
 - A minority (x2) = as the religious option in a secular context + a minority in a religious context (**Orthodoxy here is perceived denominationally – sometimes it manifests denominationally!**)
 - Lacking a stable and historic relationship with the State
 - Seen as an ecumenical partner*
 - In a space founded on the inheritance of the Protestant ethic and theology, of the Renaissance, of the counter-Reformation = a multifaceted and pluralistic context
 - It does not inform or influence the rapport and the socio-cultural dynamic
 - The keeper and depository of national, ethnic and traditional values*
 - **It is the “voluntary” option**

Portable religious identity– the personal level

- The stages of change:
 - Discovering that the Church, in the West, in “diaspora” is as itinerant and as much a minority as its communities of believers
 - Discovering the Church in its communal, communitarian (sacramental) dimension not institutional = *belonging to the Church as = the “Ο λαός του Θεού”*.
 - Re-discovering the Church as a *sacramental space** = because of time and distance
 - accepting the fact that “*we have lost the environment in which we were born / raised*” → turning this from a weakness to an advantage (2 Cor 12: 9-10)
 - *A voluntary attitude / approach towards our faith identity and practice*
- *“In exile ‘we have been liberated from age-old traditions. We have no enormous cathedrals, jewel-encrusted Gospel books, no monastery walls. We have lost our environment. Is this an accident? [...] there are signs which we must understand and paths which we must follow. Our calling is a great one, since we are called to freedom.’*
- *”*. (Sf M Skobtsova, *Under the Sign of our Time, Essential Writings*, 2003)

Portable religious identity – the ecclesial dimension

- Migration, diaspora, the West and the ecumenical reality
 - Ecumenical openness is a major element of what it means to have a “portable religious identity”. Because it points to and engenders a propensity for openness, towards an (inevitable) plural and diverse; it is the option that opposes a spirit / attitude of self-sufficiency
 - a) it humanises “the other” and this enables dialogue and mission
 - b) it asks: who is (was) my neighbour? Why did they help me? (consider the relation between Anglican and Orthodox communities who share church buildings). What does this mean for me, what does this mean in relation with God?
 - Ecumenical openness in the West helps the Orthodox Church be better prepared to exist and to be engaged in mission (as witness) in the 21st century
 - It is an exercise in dialogue, humility, listening and receptivity for us
 - If we cannot achieve this with other fellow Christians, how can we ever hope to achieve any dialogue with the secular world?!
 - So, this ecumenical exercise – because of its intrinsic plurality and alterity – is the perfect “training” for engaging with the secular world, which ranges from religious indifference to anti-religious attitudes

Portable religious identity – the ecclesial dimension

- **Orthodoxy, migration, diaspora, the West and a diverse, plural society**
 - Peter Berger, “*Orthodoxy and Global Pluralism*”, 2005, highlights the fact that, gradually, certainly at the end of the 20th century – beginning of the 21st century, Orthodoxy has faced the reality that it exists in contexts in which it is no longer the implicit, default choice, but it exists in a multiplicity of options:
 - “...for the predominant numbers of Orthodox, there has been a taken-for-granted unity between religion and community. Where Orthodoxy existed as the official church of the society, this unity was enforced by the power of the state. The only option for voluntary action was by way of dissidence...”
 - “Nothing in this history [after Constantine] has prepared Orthodoxy for the possibility of functioning as a voluntary association.” (pg. 441)
 - We now experience not just “multiple modernities” (in the UK, France, Russia, Romania, etc) but “simultaneous modernities” – which, especially for the young generation, are experienced concomitantly.
 - This results in a clash between the traditional values of one’s faith and those of modern society
 - This results in challenges at the level of hermeneutic relevance for the Orthodox Church, especially with a young demographic

Concluding points

- The experience of the “Orthodox diaspora” or of “the Orthodox in the West” is not an “academic exercise”. It should not be treated as a peculiarity or something entirely contextual, insulated from the wider experience of Orthodoxy – in the majority Orthodox countries.
- It is rather, like the input received by the body from its *epithelium*, from its skin. It should not be ignored but rather learned from and incorporated. Orthodoxy in the West is like an “advanced field lab” for the rest of Orthodoxy.
- Practically, the institutional structures of the Orthodox Church should create ways and structures to harness this feedback and support in a more mission-oriented way the Orthodox communities in the West.