

Understanding the Slavic Religious Background

Mission-minded people have good intentions when ministering and trying to reach Slavic people for the Lord. However, they can be very ineffective if they do not understand that their target population has a unique mindset, a different worldview, and the influence of Orthodoxy. The following is a very simple summary of some key areas to keep in mind when trying to reach them for the Lord.

Differing Worldviews

Worldview, in simple terms, is a way of understanding “a system of thought, forms, and rules for the behavior of people within a certain culture.”

The Western worldview is one of independence, freedom, and individual thinking. The Slavic worldview in general, on the other hand, tends to be one of group conformity. After the fall of communism, however, this worldview was in a very volatile state. Rarely in the history of mankind has a group of people who were formerly coerced into conformity been suddenly and drastically propelled into the strange world of individualism. This drastic thrust into a formerly forbidden world of materialism and individualism confused, alienated, and frustrated Slavics. Their inclination toward conformity remained strong, yet they simultaneously felt the urge to soar alone. This is difficult for a Westerner to understand.

The Influence of Russian Orthodoxy

The primary reason for ineffectiveness and problems when ministering to Slavics is an ignorance of the spiritual mind-set of the Slavic people. The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church is often underestimated.

The general Western philosophy of religious faith is influenced principally by Catholicism and Protestantism. Conversely, the Slavic people are primarily influenced by Russian Orthodoxy. In form and theology, it has remained essentially unchanged for over one thousand years.

Mysterious, Mystical, and Magical

The religious influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Slavic countries is very powerful. Although most of the people are nominal at best in their adherence to Orthodox practices, the Church’s influence on society is enormous. People living under this influence view Christianity as a set of rituals that must be accomplished before they can mystically and magically receive mysterious grace from God.

True Orthodox theology is mystical; the Orthodox Church is a liturgical Church, a Church of smells and bells. The mysterious, mystical, and magical aspect is seen in their beliefs, their buildings and furnishings, and in the atmosphere of their worship: the near absence of chairs or pews, dim lighting, head coverings for most women, icons and frescoes covering almost every inch of space on the

walls and ceiling, a massive and ornate iconostasis separating the priest and the worshipers, the smoky smell of incense and hundreds of candles burning in memory of the dead, the priest resplendent in his ornate vestments and enormous beard, and worshipers repeatedly prostrating themselves, kissing icons, and making the sign of the cross.

The mysterious, mystical, and magical elements are explicitly illustrated in the Orthodox beliefs about the Church, theosis, icons, and the sacraments, with additional images found in their rituals and customs.

The Church

Religious faith is seen by the Slavic people as something that does not necessarily apply to one’s personal life but is a set of rituals that take place at the Church. The Church is thought of as a divine-human organism, the mystical Body of Christ, as an institution founded by God having both a visible reality (the body) and an invisible reality (the soul of the Church). Because the Church is seen to be the Body of Christ, or an extension of the Incarnation, it is also the temple and dwelling place of the Spirit.

The Russian Orthodox Church is “Heaven on earth, . . . a place in which God dwells and moves.” “Outside the Church there is no salvation. . . . A man cannot have God as His Father if he does not have the Church as his mother.”

The issue of theosis is an additional illustration of this facet.

Theosis

In the Protestant Evangelical faith, salvation is seen as a complete process of justification, sanctification, and glorification. In Orthodoxy, there is little emphasis on the issue of justification. Salvation is thought of in terms of theosis. Theosis is another term for deification or becoming god. The broken relationship that man has with God is not deemed important. The goal is to reclaim the path of theosis forfeited at the Fall. Participation in the sacraments of the Church, prayer, fasting, and other works are necessary means for achievement of this purpose. Man is not really separated from God. He only took a wrong turn on the path to theosis.

Icons

The idea of a mysterious, mystical, and magical religious faith is undoubtedly seen in Orthodoxy’s belief about icons: in the Rite for the consecration of the icons, the Orthodox Church prays God to send down the grace of the Holy Spirit upon the icons, thereby giving them miraculous power to heal the sick and to exorcise the demons. By the blessing, the image wrought by the craftsman becomes what it is meant to be, a means of salvation.

Icons play a major role in Orthodox worship. The belief that an inanimate object can somehow mystically emit power influences the Orthodox believer in other matters. Westerners, for example, have often confused the kissing of Bibles, as a love for the Word of God. In most cases, however, the recipient is treating the Bible as an icon.

Sacraments

The Orthodox belief concerning the role of the sacraments gives further evidence that this faith is mystical and ritualistic. The sacraments are to the Orthodox visible signs by means of which visible grace is really communicated. Interestingly, if a person participates in the rituals of the sacraments, the perceived benefits of the sacraments are bestowed upon him regardless of whether he willingly participated or not. This is ritualistic faith in its truest sense.

There are seven sacraments in Russian Orthodoxy. For brevity, only baptism and the Eucharist are presented here.

Baptism. Orthodoxy believes it cleanses the participant of the original sin and all actual sins. The inclination to sin remains but that is irrelevant.

The Eucharist. The sacrament of the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, is seen more than any other sacrament as mystical: "...in the Church's whole life of grace there is to be found a glorification of earthly existence through the penetration of the divine actuality. And the consummation of this blending of the two worlds is the Sacrament of Sacraments — the Lord's Supper. And so in the Lord's Supper we have a particularly powerful expression of the

fundamental, all-pervading idea of the great totality, the mystic communion . . . of the all-embracing, mystical body of Christ."

Strange Rituals and Customs

When visiting a Russian Orthodox Church, the lighting of candles, kissing caskets of dead saints, being sprinkled with holy water, listening to strange chants, and smelling strange smells permeates the experience. Orthodox priests have been observed walking through the shopping bazaars offering to sprinkle people with holy water. One priest would sprinkle while another would collect donations.

Western Understanding of Russian Orthodoxy

Recognizing that Russian Orthodoxy is a ritualistic faith, it can be asserted that standard Western methods of witnessing have usually fallen short of communicating the true meaning of the Gospel. The Slavic people heard the words but interpreted them through their cultural grids and religious experiences. Most perceived the idea of praying a sinner's prayer as nothing more than a Protestant ritual that might help them. In fact, they often readily and willingly prayed a sinner's prayer even without hearing the Gospel message. Some understood, certainly, and genuine salvation did take place. In most cases, however, their lives did not change, nor did they embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In other words, the only thing that they perceived they were doing was adding a Protestant ritual to their existing list of Orthodox ones.

Edited and adapted from the "Rabbit's Foot Religion Brochure" by Dale Ledbetter