

Rabbit's Foot Religion

Worldview and Evangelistic Issues Concerning Peoples Influenced by Russian Orthodoxy

Introduction

Literally thousands from the west have had the opportunity to visit Eastern Europe over the past few years. If one were to add up all of those who made a commitment to Christ, according to reported statistics, then it would total over half the population of the former Soviet Union! Unfortunately, only a very small percentage of these ever attend church. The basis for these conflicting reports can not simply be blamed on poor follow-up. Ignorance about the spiritual worldview of those living under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church must also be considered.

Russian Orthodoxy can be summarized by three "M"'s. It is *mysterious*, *mystical*, and *magical*. The sacraments are referred to as mysteries and much of the popular understanding of a person's relationship to God through rituals is akin to mysticism and magic. Just as a child might believe his rabbit's foot brings good luck, so is the popular understanding of faith in Orthodoxy.

Source of Authority

Tradition is seen as the one and only true source of authority. The Bible is held in high regard but only as a product or result of tradition. In fact, it is often treated like an icon by the general populace.

Theological Issues

Fall of Man – Adam and Eve were not created perfect. They did not fall into grave sin. They simply took a wrong turn which forfeited their ability to reach full fellowship with God.

Salvation – Salvation is thought of in terms of *theosis* or *deification* (becoming god). The goal is to reclaim the path of *theosis* forfeited at the fall. Participation in the sacraments, prayer, fasting, and other works are necessary means for this goal. There is little concern over the broken relationship with God due to sin in our lives.

Atonement – Christ's sacrifice and victory over Satan gives man the opportunity to continue on the path of *theosis*. Payment for man's sin is considered a minor issue.

Grace - "Unmerited favor" is not found in the Orthodox concept of grace. Grace is the activities or energies of God, through the Orthodox Church, which lead to deification of believers. A person receives grace by partaking of the sacraments and by human effort. The process begins at one's baptism, is maintained with penance, and achieved temporarily through participation in the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) when the participant literally becomes one with Christ. Interestingly, personal faith is not necessary. Simple (voluntarily or involuntarily) participation in the sacraments gives grace to the individual.

Church - The Church is not simply a body of called out believers. It is not simply a building. The Church is literally God Incarnate through the person of the Holy Spirit. It is

heaven on earth. Salvation can not take place outside of the Orthodox Church.

Saints, Icons, and Relics

Saints are thought of as intercessors and protectors. They are believed to pray for the Orthodox believer just like Protestant believers pray for each other today. Mary is revered above all others because she, as the Mother of God, is the only one who most completely achieved the goal of *theosis*.

Orthodoxy is a very ritualistic religion filled with sights, smells, and sounds. Icons are thought of as "windows to the divine world" and play a major role in these rituals. They not only represent the person of their image, but actually are the essence of that person. In other words, when a person lights a candle, kisses, or says a prayer in front of an icon or relic, they are asking the help of that person to solve personal problems and achieve *theosis*.

Practical Issues

People living under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church view Christianity as a set of rituals that must be accomplished in order to mystically and magically receive mysterious grace from God. A personal relationship with God is not considered important or even necessary.

With this in mind, standard western methods of witnessing such as EE, CWT, The Four Spiritual Laws, The Roman Road, etc. all fall short of communicating the true meaning of the gospel. The people hear the words but interpret it through their cultural and religious experiences. They perceive the idea of praying a sinner's prayer as nothing more than a Protestant ritual that might help them. In fact, they will often readily and willingly pray a sinner's prayer even without hearing the gospel message. Certainly, some understand and genuine salvation does take place. In most cases, however, their lives do not change and they do not embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In other words, the only thing that they perceive they are doing is to add what they believe to be a Protestant ritual to their Orthodox ones.

Summary

Russian Orthodoxy is not Roman Catholicism. It is a very mystical and ritualistic religion. Praying to icons, lighting candles, kissing caskets of dead saints, burning incense, chants, and other rituals are all means to the path of *theosis*. In addition, there are three major issues that surface which differ from Protestant theology:

1. Man's sinful condition - He only took a wrong turn off the path of deification.
2. Grace – It is simply God's activities and work through the Church's rituals. It is not unmerited favor.

3. Salvation – The goal is to obtain deification without concern for justification.

Strategy and Response

The people who live under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church do not have to be convinced of the basics tenets of Christianity. The average person on the street usually knows something about the fact that God created the world, man is sinful, Jesus was born of a virgin and lived a perfect life, died on a cross, and rose again. Unlike most people from the west, he does not have to be convinced he is a sinner and headed to hell.

If traditional western methods fall short, how can we communicate the true gospel to them? What is a proper strategy and method of spreading the message of salvation among these people? With this in mind, the following steps are highly recommended:

1. Come with a servant's attitude. Self-serving agendas and quick fixes are not the answer. You must spend quality time with the people. They are very inquisitive by nature and would like to speak with you at length. Mass evangelistic methods should only be used as a tool to gather interested people into more intimate follow-up discussions. Successes should be measured not only by the number of people who indicate decisions for Christ but by the quality of the seed planted as well.
2. Realize that most of the people you will witness to do not attend any church. They will not be rooted in their faith. With this in mind, the subject of Orthodox beliefs will probably not even surface. Should the subject come up, it is best never to argue. There are only two possible results to arguing. First, you could lose the argument and lose all credibility. Second, even if you win the argument, you destroy their self esteem. Simply emphasize the positive aspects of the gospel message.
3. Please realize that none of us are experts on the complicated subject of Russian Orthodoxy. This summary is only the tip of the iceberg. The purpose of sharing this is to acquaint you with the worldview and mind-set of our target audience. It is not meant as ammunition for a frontal attack on Orthodoxy.
4. The western method of presenting the gospel must be modified. Spend less time telling the basic tenets of the faith and spend more time encouraging them to have a **personal relationship with the Lord**. Most western methods emphasize the free gift of salvation and saying a sinner's prayer. Certainly, these issues are genuine, but much more **emphasis must be placed on repentance and Lordship**. Some suggested passages on the theme of repentance are: Matthew 4:17; Luke 13:3,5; and Acts 17:30. **Emphasize the fact that God forgives us completely and places us in a position of acceptance immediately upon our repentance. Emphasize that grace is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8,9) that cannot be earned or deserved. Explain how Christ's sacrifice restores us into an immediate fellowship with God. Explain how grace is immediately received through faith and not by works. (Titus 3:5) Help them understand that the decision of salvation is a life-changing event, not simply a ritual.**
5. In a positive way, **emphasize that we can know God personally**. We have access to Him through the work that Jesus did on the cross and the Holy Spirit's work today. If the issue arises, do not negate their belief in prayers to icons, etc. Simply teach them there is a better way. **Explain that we have God's Spirit inter-ceding for us (Romans 8:26). Stress that since we have direct access to God through Christ's work, there is no need to have another intercessor to do the same.**
6. Please make contact with a local Slavic church in the area in advance and make specific plans to invite interested individuals to this church. It would be a good idea to have the address and contact information of the church readily available.
7. Depend on the Holy Spirit for wisdom in each situation.

I trust this brochure has helped you along the path towards understanding the mind-set and worldview of the people influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church. We are all privileged to be a part of what God is doing. May God richly bless your endeavors for His Kingdom.