

My Own Vision Of The Ultimate: Why Am I An Eastern(Oriental) Orthodox Christian?

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(Note: the words 'Oriental' were added beside 'Eastern' in order to distinguish what Metropolitan Gregorios meant by Eastern as he was using it in the general sense of geography/belief as opposed to Eastern vs Oriental Orthodoxy. He didn't care for dividing Orthodoxy into branches but for the sake of intellectual honesty we added 'oriental' so the reader may get a sense of the intent of the word as opposed to highlighting the separation among Orthodoxy today. Paulos Gregorios was an Indian Orthodox Christian belonging to the oriental orthodox church)

Why indeed am I an Eastern/Oriental Orthodox Christian? Clearly, my own choice could only be part of the answer, since I come from a family whose Christian ancestry is traced, rightly or wrongly, to the Apostle St. Thomas. I belong to a church that is presumably as old as any other Christian Church in the world, except perhaps the Mother Church of Jerusalem. The Apostle Thomas, one of the Twelve, is believed to have come to India around the middle of the first century, two decades after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Thomas died in India a martyr, and was buried in Mylapore, near Madras. The eastern/Oriental Orthodox Community in Kerala has come through many vicissitudes of history, mainly as a result of aggression from Western missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, but has survived to this day.

The choice was thus made for me, first by whoever was responsible for my being born in India to Christian parents and then by my parents, who decided that I should, like them and my four brothers, be baptized in the Malankara Orthodox Church as our Church is officially known. But subsequently I made that choice my own. I could have joined many other Churches, such as the Mennonite or the Presbyterian. I had the closest relations with the Mennonites when I was a college student (1950 - 52) at Goshen College, a Mennonite College in Indiana, USA. Or I could have joined the Presbyterian Church when I was a Bachelor of Divinity student (later converted to Master of Divinity) at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1952 to 1954. In fact most of my theological education has been in Protestant institutions (including Yale and Oxford), and my rather comprehensive exposure to Reformation thought has only helped to confirm my commitment to the apostolic tradition as maintained by the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Later, during my five-year tenure as Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, I had occasion to visit and get to know at first hand almost all the main Churches of the Reformation and Eastern/Oriental Orthodoxy, as well as to lead Bible Studies and conferences and seminars for them. Since most of the Protestant church leaders were also

members of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, I got to know them personally. Even after leaving the staff of the WCC in 1967, I continued to associate myself with that body, as a member of the Central Committee, a member of the Executive Committee, and as one of its presidents from 1983 to 1991.

During these years I came to see quite clearly that the Eastern/Oriental Orthodox Church had been, in many things that matter, more faithful than others to the one apostolic tradition that we all profess. I also saw when that Eastern/Oriental Orthodox tradition had been unfaithful-in its excessive and sometimes exclusive authority, in its basic failure to love humanity and serve it with everything at its disposal, and in its failure to come to terms with the cultural, spiritual and intellectual struggles and frustrations of the bourgeois capitalist industrial civilization that were sweeping over global humanity. I also saw the most unchristian power struggles going on among the Eastern/Oriental Orthodox, to a certain degree more deplorably so than in the Churches of the West. Despite all these lapses in practice, my respect and love for the Eastern/Oriental Orthodox tradition deepened during these years.

I have also exposed myself extensively to the Roman Catholic tradition, both through personal friendships with distinguished Roman Catholics and by fairly voluminous reading. During the sixties and seventies I had close relations with the Vatican, first as a Delegated Observer at the Second Vatican Council (1962 -65) and later for twelve years as a founding member of the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. I knew personally Popes Paul VI and John Paul I, and likewise know the present incumbent, John Paul II. I have also worked closely with some of the leading theologians of the Roman Catholic Church, in the course of half a dozen unofficial conversations organized by the Pro Oriente Foundation in Vienna in the seventies and eighties between Oriental Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians.

On Other Religions

I shall presently seek to put down briefly what in my own tradition I find most valuable, but let me add a word about other religions before I get to that point. You can very well ask me the question: being born an Indian, why are you not a Hindu in religion as well?

The answer first is that at no time in history have all Indians been Hindus. That label Hindu is a very late creation (eighteenth century?), and there never was a religion specifically labelled Hinduism until a couple of centuries ago. India has always been a multi - religious pluralistic society. Even before Jaina Mahavira and the Lord Buddha in the sixth century BC, not all Indians followed the same religion. There were the Sramanas, naked mendicant monks, the Ajivikas, the Adivasis with their own comprehensively religious approach to reality; there were also the predecessors of what later turned out to be Tantrics, Shaivites and Vaishnavites, and of the many bhakti cults that arose in India from time to time. Most of these did not accept the Authority of the Vedas. The Brahmans, who came to dominate the Sanatana Dharma later, were

originally newcomers, a distinct minority of immigrants from Central Asia, who later climbed to the top niche of the caste structure they created and reinforced with a thousand - year process of further small group migrations from Central Asia. In this respect Brahmanism is as foreign to the Indian tradition as any other religion. But it too was accepted and domesticated here after many quite violent struggles.

In India today we acknowledge eight great religions, four largely of Indian origin (Buddhism, Jainism, the Sanatana Dharma or the religion of the Vedas and Upanishads, and Sikhism) and four introduced from outside (Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Islam), all of West Asian origin. All these eight religions are fully Indian. Even Islam, which came in last, has been here for twelve centuries. Attempts to brand the latter four as non - Indian or 'foreign' have found supporters only among the fanatic followers of a fascist Hindutva of the Sangha Parivar variety.

If there is one thing we can surely say about India's cultural heritage, it is that that heritage has never been uniform or non -religious. I grew up as a Christian in the midst of that heritage; I went to a school where about a third were Christians, the others following Islam or different varieties of Sanatana Dharma. As a child I was not brainwashed by Western missionary thinking forcing me to regard and condemn non-Christians as unsaved.

In fact our community developed its own myths of religious co-existence, not just tolerance for other religions that some advocate, but genuine fraternal friendship with people of other faiths. For example, in my childhood I had my Sunday School lessons in a nearby church, St. George's Orthodox Church, Karingachira. During the feast of St. George huge church processions (with the cross and white banner of the resurrection) were taken out through the streets of our town. The Vishnu Temple in my town also had similar processions with the image of Vishnu in front. There was always danger of communal clashes as the Hindu procession entered predominantly Christian areas or vice versa, since both communities were equally prone to the evils of triumphalism.

So the myth our community developed, shocking perhaps to Western Christians, held that St. George and the Lord Vishnu were blood brothers. I may not have quite believed it as a child, but it helped create the right attitude towards my Hindu brothers and sisters. Muslims were also regarded as brothers and sisters of Christians, sharing together the once honorific title of Mapilas or Mahapillais-or 'great scribes.' So I grew up as a child with fraternal feelings for people of other religions. I knew something about their practices, but little about their deeper faith and understanding.

That knowledge, such as it is today, had to be developed in the forty years since 1954 when I returned from Princeton, revolting against the cultural arrogance and intellectual parochialism of Western Christianity. I began engaging in dialogues between Christians and Hindus, mostly organized by Christians. I remember particularly one in Stanley Jones's Sat Tal Ashram up in the Himalayas. There were the usual polite papers, in which each religion tried to prove that it was

more right than the other, and putting on false poses of universal charity and general benignness. But the best breakthroughs came during the coffee breaks. Two I remember vividly.

One was a question and comment from a Hindu university professor. He asked me rather bluntly, “You seem to have some measure of honesty about you. Can I ask you the question: why do you Christians want to have dialogue with Hindus? You have largely failed in your fire and thunder evangelism to convert us Hindus. Is not dialogue your new technique to get our ear, so that you can try to convert us in a devious way?” Unfortunately most of the Protestant and Roman Catholic literature on dialogue seems to give ground for the Hindu friend’s suspicion of Christian motives in dialogue.

I decided that day that I would accept two principles for Christian dialogue with people of other faiths. The first was the principle of maximum transparency. Christians should have no hidden motives for dialogue with people of other faiths. They are all people whom Christ loves and for whom He gave His life. I decided that the love of Christ for all humanity must be the propelling motive for dialogue, though other motives such as the affirmation of, and concern for, the unity of humanity, and the need for pluralistic but harmonious local, national and global communities could be a subsidiary motive. But no hidden motive to convert the other. The second principle was that in interreligious dialogue no religion should claim any superiority. In dialogue all are on the same plane, respectfully listening to and learning from each other. You may be convinced that your religion is the only true one. But do not make any claims of superiority over others on that ground. We are all equally contingent and dependent on God’s grace and mercy, whether we be Hindus, Christians or Muslims, whether some of us acknowledge that grace and mercy or not.

I spoke above about Christ’s love for all humanity. In that connection I must narrate another coffee-break experience in dialogue. Again it was a Hindu friend who engaged me in one-to-one dialogue. ‘You seem to be tough enough to take this,’ his preamble immediately put me on guard. “I want to tell you what images go through my Hindu mind, when you Christians talk to us about your “Christian love” for Hindus. I visualize a giant spider, oozing out from the pores to its skin quantities of goeey fluid, called Christian love, and skilfully weaving a glorious web in which it wants to catch me, an unsuspecting Hindu fly.’ I was shocked, but kept my cool, for I knew he had justification for the allegation. The Christian love, which came out in the form of charity or of useful social institutions such as hospitals, schools and orphanages, was still governed by the motives of ‘witnessing to Christ’ and of making Christianity attractive. It may be unfair to regard all Christian social work as an advertisement for the gospel, but non-Christians do see it that way much too frequently.

It was only in about 1967, when I left the staff of the WCC in Geneva and returned to my country and church, that I began taking up the issue of dialogue with people of other faiths more seriously. I saw the damage done to the image and reality of the Christian Church by the unchristian attitude towards other religions fostered by reformed thinkers such as Barth, Brunner

and Kraemer. They were speaking out of their cultural parochialism rather than from any genuine Christian insight, it seemed to me.

One of the first achievements was the setting up of a sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Other Faiths in the WCC. We were able to secure the services of a first-rate Indian Christian, Dr. Stanley Samartha, to head that unit. He did a masterful job. Despite the strong inhibitions of a culturally narrow-minded European Church, we were able to organize several small significant interfaith consultations, which laid down some of the rules and principles for fair and honest interreligious dialogue. We also ventured into the experience of praying meaningfully with people of other religions in the course of these seminars and consultations. This caused a lot of furore in European Christian circles, and I remember how a friend of mine, a German professor, the late Dr. Margull, almost lost his chair in the university, on the charge that he, a Christian, had participated in the prayer services of Muslims. But we kept plugging away quietly, until it all came to a head in the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975, in Nairobi, Kenya.

Some of us presumed, especially in the Dialogue Working Group of the WCC, that the time was ripe to test the claim of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that Christianity, especially European Christianity, had come of age. At the Nairobi Assembly of 1975, we invited a select number of observers from the great religions of the world and devoted a whole section of the Assembly to interreligious dialogue, in the hope that along with the environmental issue being highlighted at Nairobi, the issue of cultural pluralism and interreligious dialogue would move from the margins of the WCC agenda to its centre. I was asked to chair that section on dialogue, with our distinguished non-Christian friends present.

Our hopes were soon to be dashed on the hard rocks of European cultural parochialism. In response to my presidential remarks, a friend of mine, a Norwegian Lutheran bishop, asked me, ‘in what sense does the Chairman find the revelation in Jesus Christ so insufficient that he has to go the non-Christians to learn the truth?’

I was offended, but being in the chair, could not retort in my usual rude manner. so I responded, ‘In this sense that the Chairman is not as fortunate as his friend the bishop from Norway, who seems to have so mastered the revelation in Jesus Christ, that he is so totally self-satisfied and does not feel any need to learn from others.’ I doubt that the barb got through. But my non-Christian friends saw for themselves the shameful narrow mindedness of European Christianity. They were hurt. But kept their cool and continued to be polite.

The Assembly decided that the WCC was not to engage in any more multi-religious dialogue, but to stick with bilateral dialogues in which Christians kept the control. The Nairobi Assembly disillusioned me, and I came to the conclusion that neither forms of Western Christianity, Roman Catholic Protestant, were mature enough to engage in dialogue Christians could not control and manipulate. I am not claiming that Eastern(Oriental) Orthodox Christianity is more mature or

more open in this regard. In fact it is only in contrast with the dry scholasticism and exclusivistic dogmaticism of Eastern Orthodoxy that we can see Western Christianity in a better light.

A Crisis of Confidence

Anyway, the process was begun by which I lost confidence in the leadership of the Western Church - Protestant, Roman Catholic or Sectarian. And my own Eastern Orthodoxy was lost on the margins of humanity, quixotically and uncomprehendingly struggling against many hostile forces on all sides - Islam in the Middle East, aggressive Roman Catholic, Protestant and Sectarian proselytizing missions everywhere, atheist communism in Eastern and Central Europe, and liberal secularism reaching out globally with its bloodsucking tentacles. Eastern Orthodoxy developed a barricade psychology of self-defence by sheer negativity, smug in its pettiness, making tall claims about its monopoly on Christian truth, and yet unable to communicate with either the modern world or even with its own youth and laity (including the alienated Orthodox women).

In 1983 the Vancouver Assembly had chosen me to be one of its presidents, a desperate move on the part of the WCC establishment to keep me out of power in its policy making and running. A president of the WCC is always a decorative figure, supposed to represent the WCC on unimportant public occasions, a senior figure who generally keeps out of all controversy. I was the only legitimate candidate to be moderator of the Central Committee, since no one from the Orthodox tradition had been allowed to be general secretary or moderator up till that time, and only the general secretary's post is more powerful than that of the moderator.

I was aware of the antics of power brokering behind the scenes in Vancouver. Philip Potter had been general secretary for some time, and he wanted only a docile and malleable moderator. He chose a Scottish schoolmaster, with neither knowledge of the world church nor the basic theological competence needed, as his candidate for moderator. He told me, with a measure of defiance shining through his eyes, that that was his choice and that he was going to get him elected, in the teeth of all opposition. He also announced to me that my name was being proposed as one of the presidents. I tried to advise him that he was unlikely to get his candidate for moderator elected. He told me that he would 'show me'. He also wanted his confidant and adviser, Deputy general Secretary Professor Konrad Raiser of Germany, to be his own successor as general secretary when his term ended in a year or so.

It was one of those rare occasions in the WCC when I entered the fray of power brokering. I thought it would be disastrous for the WCC to have the power combination of Potter, Raiser and the Scottish schoolmaster. The Orthodox would feel left out totally. So I acted. And it worked. The Central Committee rejected the general secretary's proposal, and by a muddled process chose the German Praeses Joachim Held as moderator. That dashed to the ground Konrad Raiser's chances for the succession, at least for the time being, since a German moderator and a German general secretary was an unacceptable combination.

With that I became cynical of the WCC as a 'privileged instrument' of the ecumenical movement. There seemed to be more dirty politics in that Christian body than in most nation-states. I served as president until the Canberra Assembly in 1991, but I was systematically kept out of all important decision making, and was seldom allowed to represent the WCC at any important public function. Whenever I announced that I was going to do something on my own, not as president, the establishment grew fearful and tried to stop or circumvent me. When I announced for example that I was going to Managua for the sixth anniversary of Nicaragua's liberation, they decided to send two more presidents and additional persons to hedge me. They were afraid I would say something inappropriate in favour of the Sandinistas.

I did in Managua what I thought was right. In the first place I went to the place where Foreign Minister d'Escotto was fasting in protest against the American threat of aggression and sanctions. I spent a day with him, fasting in sympathy. I saw President Daniel Ortega, and asked him very politely why the Sandinistas had been so racist and mean in their treatment of the Misquito Indians. I still remember Ortega standing up from his presidential chair, and with bowed head saying to me, 'I confess before God and before you that the Sandinistas did wrong. We are doing everything possible to recompense the Misquitos.'

I went to other Central American countries such as El Salvador and the Dominican Republic and visited the people who were being tortured and massacred by powerful pro-US fascist forces. I made a firsthand report on what I saw to the Central Committee meeting in Argentina, and the resolution on Central America was approved without any discussion, partly because of the heavy emotional impact of my report.

I was very grieved that the progressive Latin American Christians, who deplored the oppression in Central America, were not aware of what they themselves had done to the original natives of that continent. Even the so-called liberation theologians are still today unable to establish rapport with the indigenous people whom they have uprooted and decultured.

The net result of my rather extensive ecumenical experience is that I have not been able to spot one Christian Church in the world that is even half faithful to the way of the cross and to the teaching of the Apostles. I have gradually begun to look outside the Christian Church, to see what God is doing.

I see the demand for full manifestation of the freedom and dignity of all human beings - men, women and children - as a major thrust still in the march of history. I see the interreligious movement and the women's movement as significant aspects of the advance of human history. I can conceive of the peace movement with a socialist commitment as bound to come back soon into the centre of things, as the contradictions in the single market global economy begin to reveal themselves more manifestly, quite possibly leading to a world-wide economic crash. Above all I am convinced that until humanity sees that the secular civilization, which denies the centrality of God, has been the greatest mistake in our history, it cannot find the way forward.

I see that I cannot put my trust either in Christian Church activities, or in the work of governments and intergovernmental agencies such as the UN, to begin to lead humanity in the way it has to go. That leadership has to come from groups of committed people of all religions and of no professed religion, in all countries and on all continents, working to enlighten the awareness of people and mobilize their power to act in the best interests of humanity.

My Vision - My Faith

Let me now conclude with a confession of my faith and a brief reference to the vision that impels me, even in my seventy third year.

I know that the created order is in the hands of God. He brought it into being out of nothingness. It is His will that still maintains it in existence. And that will is good. There is no trace of evil in it. So I shall not be daunted by evil, or be stymied by fear of evil. The good is true; it alone is true and everything else must find dissolution in its own time.

I belong to that created order, but am by no means the centre of it; everything else and everyone else shares in the destiny of creation, which is good. But the separation of good from evil causes not only both joy and peace, but also pain and suffering. That separation happens throughout history, but it will take place in a special way at the 'harvest' - the final consummation and summing up of all history, which happens beyond history.

The created order came into being through the Son; he became the Son of Humanity, part of our human destiny and the destiny of the created order, sharing our kind of peace and joy, and also our kind of pain and suffering. Him I adore; Him I love; He is neither male nor female, though I use the male personal pronoun, since we are yet to create a common personal pronoun in the English language. His I am, and that is my fulfilment. I trust in Him; He is my hope, my compass and my anchor. He is the destiny of the created order.

I need to learn from all, and have indeed learned from many. My major liberation in life has been from thinking that the Western way of thinking, with its specific categories and modalities, is the only way to think and to know. Now that I know a little bit about the Yin-Yang polarity-complementarity way of thinking and knowing in the Chinese Tao, I do not have to be a slave of the Western subject-object mode of thinking, and the logic of the excluded middle. From my own Indian tradition I have learned the principle of Ekam advitiam or One without a Second; I know now that all diversity and difference ultimately find their unity in the One without a Second; that One is more ultimate than the many. My own Eastern Orthodox tradition has confirmed that there is no creation other than God or outside God, because the Infinite Ultimate has neither outside nor other.

I have learned from the Jains the great Anekantavada, which holds that all statements are conditional and qualified truth, which have to be supplemented and completed by other truths; that our Ahimsa or non-violence should extend to other ways of thinking, and not just to other beings.

I have learned from Buddhists that all epistemology is finally without basis; that our perceptions of all things, including the world, are but mental events that happen when our kind of mind - sense and whatever is out there come into contact with each other; that this world which the secular mindset takes to be some kind of ultimate reality is neither real nor unreal, and should be taken seriously, but not so absolutely.

And I have learned much from Jews and Arabs, from Sikhs and Zoroastrians, from Adivasis and Aborigines, from Africans and from the indigenous peoples of America. And I hope I am still learning and will continue to do so until the end.

I have also learned a lot from the communists-that most avowedly atheistic wing of the European Enlightenment; I have learned from their weaknesses and failures just as much as from their apparent successes. I cultivated them especially for two reasons: (a) their social goals were more compatible with the Christian idea of a just society than that of liberalism and its capitalist ideology; (b) my Christian brothers and sisters in the West, especially the Roman Catholic Church, but also Protestants, were vilifying everything the communists were doing. I found anticommunism anti - Christian, and therefore decided to associate and work with the communists so long as they were committed to just societies in which oppression and exploitation was reduced to a minimum and in which all human beings could live with freedom and dignity.

Alas, the communists became as dogmatic, corrupt and power hungry as the Roman Catholic Church and dug their own graves. But I still remain committed to socialism as the nearest alternative to the society I am envisaging as a Christian.

And I have learned much from the Eastern Orthodox heritage: that Eucharistic worship and adoration with thanks giving are the primary responses to what God has done in Christ-not preaching or witnessing, that the Christian life in the community is more important than Christian talking and doing; that the Christian's personal life is not an individual matter, but the work of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith; that the Holy Spirit of God has been at work in the whole creation from its very inception, and is still work, not just in the Church, but in the whole universe, bringing it to fulfilment according to God's plans; that I can trust the Truine God to fulfil the created order according to His plans, despite many apparent failures and regressions I am privileged to be initiated, by baptism-chrismation, into the great mystery of the universe as God guides it to its destiny.

The vision that beckons defies human word and concept. The mind cannot envision what God has set in store for creation. The destiny is good without mitigation, pure joy in love, peace in community with all, ecstasy without triumph sweeter than anything our mind and senses can now enjoy. The human mind can neither conceive of nor imagine what God has set in store for us and for all creation. Our fantasy and our imagination cannot soar so high. Even when we finally experience it, it will be beyond all language and concept.

It is the Spirit that assures me of this. And the Spirit leads me there. That Spirit, we have a foretaste of here. Only a feeble foretaste. The reality will surpass all present hope and human expectation.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, one true God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

(1994)