



The Orthodox "I really like their hats!"

Source: [The Russian Orthodox Church and the World](#)

Back in December of 1993, I attended the memorial service celebrating the tenth anniversary of the falling away of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. During this service, Fr. Thomas Hopko, the current Dean of the Seminary and son-in-law of Fr. Schmemmann, invited us of the family to be present at Father's funeral. In that family, he recalled for us how Fr. Alexander had always been in a talk to and Fr. Thomas had had many years ago. In that talk, he told Fr. Thomas that one of the things for which he would like to be remembered is a "hat."

The "hat" was a very simple, "no-frills" hat. He was very clear in stating that he did not care and do for us to bring "religion" to us. He came to bring the Kingdom of God. Fr. Alexander believed the fact that we have tried to reduce the Church to a club, where people come to feel good. In the context of the Eastern, Father's own words from *For the Sake of the World* were said:

... it is here that we reach the heart of the matter: For Christianity help is not the solution. Truth is the solution. The purpose of Christianity is not to help people by convincing them with death, but to reveal the Truth about life and death so that people may be saved by the Truth. Salvation, however, is not only not identical with help, but is, in fact, opposed to it. Christianity speaks with religion and ecclesiastical because they offer "ineffective help," but precisely because they "suffice," because they "suffice" the words of men. If the purpose of Christianity were to take away from man the fear of death, to reconcile him with death, that would be an insult for Christianity, for other religions have done this, indeed, better than Christianity.





Behind this radical rejection of "holiness" as a source of strength, Fr. Alexander also had, as we've mentioned at his memorial service, a real distaste for "holiness" as it is so often used in the Orthodox world filled with people speaking Greek with people here, here, here, here and a classic desire for liturgical propriety & desire to think that there were priests and deacons actually argue and fight over liturgical questions during the liturgy?

All of this is not to say that Father was not for liturgical order and propriety indeed. I was a sub-deacon at an ordination and we forgot to take the bishop's candlestick out for a blessing when the ordination was done, and Father did not wait until the service was over to call the deacon very clearly to our attention. At the time I served as a priest, Father made sure I had washed my hands and said the prayer before starting prostrations. But he, it is to say that Father understood that these external realities of our faith are there and important only in so far as they make manifest the internal reality of the presence of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom which He brings for us in the life of the Church.

We Orthodox face a unique temptation in this last matter. Our liturgical life is so rich and the contents of our church life so rich and beautiful, that we can sometimes be dazzled and begin to mistake the external things with the internal things. Music, hats, incense, etc. are what the world generally knows about Orthodoxy. What the world generally does not know about Orthodoxy, however, is the Father's message which lives in our Church and Tradition. Basically, the world does not know this because we, as individuals comprising the Church, do not truly know and practice this Father's.

I was brought to mind of Father and these things when I watched a recent episode of the sitcom *Brooklyn*. In this episode, his Father George, in order to impress his girlfriend and her parents, decided to become "Lutheran Orthodox." In the course of the show, the priest was shown to be old man with long beard and flowing black robes, with language that was even more dysfunctional than the language we are used to seeing in our Church. Indeed, when the priest asked George why he was converting, he said, "I really like your hat." The service was shown as a strange event resembling nothing I've ever seen in an Orthodox church, but a language that was not English, in a church very green with incense, etc., all kind of a fun, old-time and more who would respond to the "Lutheran" language.

The next thing that the show wanted to portray, however, came when George's parents, who were out of town, came home and found out he was converting. His Father goes apoplectic and screams at him, in a line that was obviously funny and incredibly sad, "But that's the group that makes apostasy!" That's what the world, at least in America, knows about the Orthodox. Old man in strange garb doing strange things in front of a few old people (probably immigrants) in a strange language at a strange place possibly including apostasy.

The world is very quick to learn and pay attention when we are "quirky" with our ethnic customs. They love it when we have a candle. They come in when something happens in Russia or Greece or some other "Orthodox" place. They come when we have an ethnic festival and sell ethnic goods. They catch their breath when we have a dispute over things like the old calendar, language, etc. In short, they are quick to pay attention when we are "quirky." When we don't do it. When we are being the rest of the "old" religion. And we are often too willing to have a flag on.

To a certain degree, we would have to say "Yes-but that's who we are." As far as dress is concerned, certainly, etc. (even hats can certainly a part of who we are). They separate us from the world and show that we are not apart from it. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with ethnic traditions and foods, or even with raising money for the Church's living there.

But, have you noticed that we were the last four paragraphs without mentioning God? There are no many people ("people" being both clergy and lay), in and out of the Church, who want to reduce the Church to some ancient ethnic or liturgical custom that has nothing to do with the contemporary world, who think that the new calendar is a rejection of true Orthodoxy, who think that wearing a clerical shirt and collar is "highness," who walk by the hundreds, thousands and legions of the world (doing nothing anyway) and actually have the time to think it's a sin to working in anything that the "mother tongue" who can still give him to only realize these common sense like are something we can learn from. Work that expands the Church to witness to Jesus Christ at work, in the neighborhood or to family, who are willing to lay down their lives and go to jail, but don't believe in a "Protestant" intention, who work at the University of Wisconsin group that asked for help building a new temple and got 1000 volunteers from around New England, but are too busy just, all, young, dependent with the "leaders of the Church" etc. I've volunteered for anything or done tasks for the operation or growth of the Church. In short, there are so many people who are ready, willing and able to be described as "that group that sometimes apostasy."

We have so many problems in today's world and so many, in particular, in American society, that we do not have the luxury of really spending a lot of time in such liturgical pursuits. If we expect to have a chance to connect contemporary culture, we have to be willing individual Christians, concerned with matters of the faith, morality and ethics as much or even more than with matters of external appearance. Saint Paul says to "Tranquillity..." and I think and I cannot disagree, knowing that they possess wills." (1 Tim. 2:2) I personally hope we reach a time when we worry more about what a priest or bishop says and does instead of what he is wearing. We have to be faithful, spiritual, practical, respectful, kind, loving, giving, forgiving and righteous. We have to be that as individuals and we have to be that as a Church.

We do not also remember that the world, especially American culture, will never stop laughing at Orthodox Christians. We can, however, influence whether they laugh at us because we are an out of touch, ethnic, 19th century relic, or because they cannot accept the Christian message, Christian morality and Christian life which they are so clearly preached and lived out in the life of the Church.

It is almost the 21st century and we are celebrating the Bicentennial of Orthodox Christianity in North America. Maybe it's time for us to pay away our apostasy.

