The Question of Evangelism in the Orthodox East:

The Silent Missionary

Shannon L Smith and Joseph B Studemeyer

University of South Carolina
Abstract

This study will concern itself with two primary questions regarding Orthodox Christian evangelism: Why is the Orthodox East reticent when it comes to outspoken, mainstream evangelism, as it is presented in the Christian West, and what is the evangelical philosophy of the Orthodox Church? The research will endeavor to firstly introduce a little known branch of Christianity to an unaware public. Secondly, the writers will seek to demonstrate why a modest presence has worked well for Orthodoxy, preserving its integrity, with little compromise to its tradition. The final endeavor will be to represent Orthodox Christianity as a religion concerned with the public by discussing its efforts to disseminate information about itself through evangelism.

*Keywords:* Orthodoxy Church, evangelism, outreach, information dissemination
The Orthodox Church is well known for its ancient tradition and rich history. Anyone familiar with it can readily attest to its contemplative and introspective spirit. Those who know the faith best will affirm its emphasis on mystery, a mystery that is, ironically, guarded by the faithful. But despite its history and age, and perhaps due to its undeniably enigmatic nature, Eastern Christianity has purposely maintained a position outside of mainstream American Christian culture. In fact, many Americans who call themselves “Christian” have never even heard of Orthodoxy. Wherein lies the blame? The seeming invisibility of Orthodoxy in America could be due in part to the failure of many denominations to teach Church history. Most churches (quite understandably) would rather spend their time discussing their own ancestry and theology than the history and theology of other churches. Some will charge that Orthodoxy, arguably more so than any other Christian tradition, associates itself exclusively with particular ethnicities, as seen in its many churches, be they Greek, Russian, Serbian, Romanian, etc. Anyone unable to identify himself with one of these ethnicities may, very naturally, find himself feeling out of place or even excluded. Thus, there is a common complaint of a cultural divide. One could even argue that because Orthodoxy is the smallest of the major branches in Christianity—claiming about 300,000,000 adherents—its voice is hard to hear in a cacophony of other voices, voices so often louder than its own. But all of these excuses are only approximations of the real reason Orthodoxy is so introverted, at least when it is compared to other traditions within Christianity, for they all neglect Orthodoxy’s voluntary reticence to call attention to itself and evangelize the masses in an overt manner. Unarguably, Orthodoxy practices silence in ways that no other Christian tradition considers; one need only look to Orthodoxy’s embrace of hesychasm, the spiritual method that seeks to achieve inward stillness and quietude, for proof of that. So why indeed does the Orthodox Church seem so reticent to advertise itself? Why does it seem that the
Orthodox faith is not doing more to promote itself in the ways of evangelism, ways that are comparable to the methods of Protestants and Catholics in the Christian West? And how, if the Orthodox Church is indeed truly reluctant to reach the masses in an overt manner, has it survived for more than two thousand years?

Before we proceed with an attempt to answer these questions, the writers would like to offer a disclaimer, or perhaps even a caveat: it is not our intention to bare the secrets of Orthodoxy’s aspirations, or somehow expose Orthodoxy for what it truly, that is, in its essence, is. The writers agree that such ambitions, firstly, lie outside of their own competencies. The Orthodox tradition, and Christianity as such, are by definition mysterious, and no amount of logical discourse will change that. For that reason, nothing new shall be said. But even were the writers erudite and perspicacious enough to render Orthodoxy bare, out of respect, the writers will seek to maintain a degree of discretion when surveying the ancient faith. The writers agree that above all else, the mystery of Orthodoxy is to be preserved, for paradoxically, though the mystery may seem to deter the unfamiliar and initiated, from an esoteric perspective, it is the mystery that entices, enchants, and illumines. Lastly, the writers would also like to make it clear that their explanations are only approximations of facts and observations made by more qualified writers, i.e., the Orthodox Church’s theologians, saints, and scholars. So much more can be said than what will be said here, and the interested reader should not limit himself to this paper’s inadequate, though well-meaning, reflections.

The Nature of the Church

In order to address the questions of Orthodoxy’s presence in the world and its methods of evangelism, we will first need to address the nature of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Christianity as such. In many ways, Christianity is a union of complementary opposites, and the
Orthodox Church seeks to elucidate this. Saints of the faith speak of the seeming paradox of repose in rigor, peace in the midst of struggle, “glory in infirmity” (II Cor. 12:9). From an Orthodox perspective, the Christian life is said to be one of kenosis (κένωσις), the Greek term that describes a self-emptying for the purpose plerosis (πλήρωσις), a Self-filling. We find this paradox best illustrated in the Incarnation: “[Christ] being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death . . .” (Phil. 2:6-8). “. . . If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for My sake, the same shall save it.” (Luke 9:23-24). These instructions given by Christ are the Christian’s prescription for his own ex-carnation, his kenosis, resulting in plerosis, deification and union with and in God. As the familiar quotation of St Athanasius (298-373) goes, “God became man that man might become God.”

The Christian religion is, therefore, before all else, a personal religion; that is, it is primarily concerned with the relationship between human persons and Divine persons. This relationship, from a human standpoint, is not merely an “I-thou” association, but in many ways acts as a conduit for understanding the first-person perspective. The Bible seems to affirm that humans are incapable of knowing even ourselves outside of a relationship with God, for we are not only said to be made to resemble God,¹ but are further supposed to have our very being in Him.² The function of Christianity as a religion, and by extension its professor, the Church, is to

¹ “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness…” (Genesis 1:26 KJV)
² “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.” (Acts 17:27-28 KJV)
offer the introduction of the person to God, to teach how the Christian may come to know Him, and in doing so, come to realize his own self.

But in an attempt to explicate this higher truth, perhaps what we should really be saying is that the function of the Orthodox Church is not to offer the Christian an introduction, but better, a re-introduction to God, to remind the person of God. Religion, in the most proper sense of the term, literally means to re-bind, to re-attach; it applies only to something which is above all not a construction of the human mind, but is, on the contrary, of divine origin, so that it can be said to be supernatural, revealed or mysterious, and its purpose is to provide an effective link between the world and God (Northbourne, 1963, pg. 1).

Thus, religion serves as a way, a salvific path, by which man reunites with the Divine. From the Orthodox perspective, in reality, man already knows God; how could he not? Being made in the imago Dei, man is left with no other choice but to know God. “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee”, the Prophet Jeremiah says (Jer. 1:5). But it is far from the case, the tradition would claim, that man knows he knows God, hence the need for religion. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says in Personhood: Orthodox Christianity and the Connection Between Body, Mind, and Soul:

…the human person without God is not normal but abnormal, not human but subhuman. To be created in the image means that we are created for fellowship and communion with God, and if we repudiate that fellowship and communion, we are denying our own true self (1996, pg. 3).

Thus, what man needs most is a remembrance, an anamnesis (ἀνάµνησις), and the Orthodox Church’s ambition is to facilitate this remembrance by encouraging cooperation or convergence
with the Divine on behalf of man that man may reacquaint himself with his Origin. It achieves this by forming within man a desire for the Divine Reality through sacraments, kerygma (κήρυγμα), or preaching, and evangelism.

Supposing we were to use complementary opposites to describe evangelism in the Orthodox Church, “boldness within modesty” might be two likely adjectives. This boldness, perhaps more than ever, is best demonstrated in the Church’s long-standing allegiance to tradition, an allegiance that refuses to yield to the caprice of modernity. Again, those familiar with the Church will verify that more than any other Christian tradition, Orthodoxy has maintained the principles and practices of the early Christian Church, principles and practices established by the patriarchs, ecumenical teachers, fathers, ascetics, and saints. It is rare that the Orthodox Church is persuaded by fashion and trend; on the contrary, the methods practiced by Orthodoxy for achieving sanctity within the spiritual life have proven effectual often enough for Orthodoxy, and the Orthodox see no reason to “fix” something that is not “broken”. We call this unwillingness to succumb to current convention “bold” because in an age where traditionalism is often repudiated, Orthodoxy stands to suffer the same repudiation, and often does. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy seems not to count such a cost.3

As for modesty, as much as the Orthodox Church is bold, She is incredibly self-effacing. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” said Christ (Matt. 5:3). Such modesty can be found in the Church’s emphasis on spiritual and physical asceticism, in the practice of corporate worship (complete with deferential bowing [metanoia] and prostrations to icons, priests, and the laity) reverent clothing, frequency and length of services, and silence. Such modesty is not contained within the confines of the Church alone, or for that matter, to the inward life of the Christian.

3 One need only look to the news where such repudiation easily escalates to persecution, or open a book that examines the Crusades.
We find a great deal of the same modesty in how the Orthodox Church has traditionally presented itself to the world and to non-Orthodox Christians, though there are exceptions to this rule. The Church is extremely soft-spoken, often preferring a discrete whisper to a sensational outcry that can so often be tawdry and trite. At the risk of making a generalization, and we would do well to remember that there is the occasional exception, the Church’s *modus operandi* when it comes to speaking publicly about the faith, *vis-à-vis* other more outspoken strands of Christianity, may be best summed up in the familiar story of Elijah the Prophet’s encounter with God:

> And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper (I Kings 19: 11-12).

Unarguably, it is mystery and discretion the Church prefers. The practice of modesty, says the Church, is an emulation of Christ, who in the utmost humility became as we are (Phil. 2:5:13), and if we are to become like Him, then we must fashion ourselves in His image and likeness.

With Christianity clearly a religion concerned with the nature of person, it could reasonably be assumed that the dissemination of itself should take into account the full range of human faculties, and seek to appeal to them all. Typically, the word “evangelism”, the spreading of the Christian religion, is almost inextricably connected in the modern Western mind with sentimental and flamboyant preachers on television and young men on bicycles equipped with pamphlets and an armory of memorized Scripture. While this is, admittedly, a stereotype, it does
seem that evangelism in the Christian West is rather binary, either falling into a purely emotional appeal or resembling the dry arguments of Scholastic philosophy. But to Orthodox sensibilities, such a model is incomplete, and even distasteful, for reasons that shall be discussed. Consequently, Orthodox Christians are obliged to provide an alternative to the common “emotional-rational” dichotomy of Western evangelism.

**Evangelical appeal**

The word “evangelism” is derived from the Koine Greek word *evaggelion* (εὐαγγέλιον), a noun most literally translated as “good news”. A simple and cursory analysis of this phrase indicates that the sharing of the Christian Gospel should, at very least, involve an emotive appeal and a rational appeal; from such an analysis, we understand that not only is the news good *qua* its role as an invitation to Goodness, objectively speaking, but one *should also feel* that it is good, subjectively. This notion seems to find support in the Gospel of St Luke, when an angel announces to a group of shepherds the birth of Christ, saying, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings (εὐαγγελίζοµαι) of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10). The first word in the phrase “good tidings”, often rendered “good news”, corresponds to the affective dimension of man. The second word in the phrase moves from the emotional realm to the rational, indicating that a set of circumstances and facts has been presented for one to reasonably consider, thus corresponding to the rational dimension of man. Christianity, in addition to being a personal religion, is also quite concerned with concrete facts, not simply abstract claims. All of
the claims it makes concerning the Incarnation, Mission, and Crucifixion of Christ are grounded in particular geographical locations and ascribed places on a historical timeline.⁴

Proper evangelism, then, must appeal to the rational capacity of man, and not just merely the affective capacity of man; it must, in some sense, make sense if it is to attract and convert.⁵ To borrow from St Anselm’s model, though certainly, “God is That which nothing greater can be thought”, nevertheless, in a sense, “That than which nothing greater can be thought can be thought”, and if man is going to be properly evangelized, say the Orthodox, then these two principles must be taken into full consideration and even practiced. Effective evangelism, say the Orthodox, must appeal to his mind and emotions, if his will is to be changed.

The proper dissemination of the Christian religion, however, does not seem to be merely a combination of emotional appeals and rational discourse. If the evangelist seeks to inculcate a certain emotion alone, any long-term success of the transformation of the individual is unlikely. For the majority of people, emotions are transient, often dependent on the trifles of daily life; a faith based on them is bound to be erratic. Rationality, by the same token, cannot exhaust the fullness of Christianity. Certain doctrines of the faith (e.g. the Trinity) are not able to be fully comprehended with the rational mind, though this does not necessitate that they become matters solely of faith. Even the greatest rationalist of the Christian West, St Thomas Aquinas, came to believe that the rational faculties were inadequate for the perception of God; after a religious experience in 1273, Aquinas is reputed to have said, “All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me.” It cannot be merely a good feeling

⁴ Unlike the Mahayana Buddhist concept of expedient means (upāya), the vast majority of Christians throughout history have rejected the notion that the major events recounted in the New Testament could be historically false and still point towards greater truths.
⁵ The presence of reason in the process of evangelism, incidentally, seems to strike a death blow at the fidiestic claims made by Tertullian, Martin Luther, amongst others.
about God or logical belief in the Christian tradition that evangelism seeks to instill in a person, Orthodoxy says, though both of these areas should and must be addressed. Emotion and rationality are anagogical tools for the evangelist and cannot simply be bypassed or ignored. St Ireneaus of Lyon (c.130-202), writing in *Against Heresies*, highlights the need for a holistic approach to evangelism by analyzing human composition. “By the hands of the Father,” he writes,

that is, by the Son and the Spirit, the human person was created in the likeness of God. The person was so created, not just a part of the person. Now soul and spirit are certainly part of the person, but they are not the person as such. For the complete person consists in the commingling and union of the soul that receives the spirit [or breath] of the Father, together with the flesh [or physical nature] that is fashioned according to the image (n.d.).

The dissemination of information by an evangelist, from an Orthodox perspective, should work in such a way as to turn the human view “upward” and “inward”. The appeals to emotion made by an Orthodox evangelist are normative and intended to foster a stable emotional state. An evangelist must also provide a rational basis for accepting the faith through relevant historical information and logical discourse. From the Orthodox perspective, the evangelist cannot move another person into relationship, but can, by the anagogical structure of information, put one on a trajectory towards God.

This trajectory leads us to the other dimension of man yet discussed. The faculty which humans employ in this journey “upward” and “inward” is referred to in the Orthodox world as the *nous* (νοῦς), the eye of the heart, sometimes rendered the “intellect”. Not at all synonymous
with intelligence, the intellect is the non-discursive faculty by which God is experienced in accordance with the promise of Christ in the Gospel of St Matthew, “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). The intellect is the supra-sensory faculty that transcends reasoning and works apart from emotions. If our reason and emotions work *ad rem*, that is, if they rely upon details in need of association with other details that culminate progressively in a definitive conclusion, then the intellect works with a penetrating and infallible immediacy free of circumstances and time. “Everyone knows that man comprises soul and body. . .”, says William Stoddart in his *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*:

. . . But in fact, man is ternary: he comprises Spirit (= Intellect), soul, and body.  

In the Middles Ages, this ternary was called *spiritus, anima, corpus*. The soul is immortal, but at the same time it is formal, individual, and subjective. The spirit or intellect is immortal, and it is also supra-formal, universal, and objective (2008, pg. 45).

The practice of perceiving the Divine Reality independent of our reason and emotions with the intellect is what is referred to as “intellection”, and is not only a central focus in Orthodox theology, but also one of the lodestone of its evangelism.

The proper practice of intellection is, from an Orthodox perspective, absolutely dependent on one’s control over his emotions and reasoning capacity. As Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos (Greece) writes,

In order to attain vision of the uncreated light, a person must cut off every connection between the soul and what is below, detach himself from everything

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6 “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thess. 5:23).
by keeping Christ’s commandments and through the dispassion which comes from that, he must transcend all cognitive activity ‘through continuous and sincere and immaterial prayer’. Therefore he must have been healed already, through keeping Christ’s commandments and through freeing his soul from all sinful connection with created things” (1994, n.p.).

From an affective standpoint, Orthodox are speaking of dispassion or apatheia (ἀπάθεια), a control over our emotions and passions, lest they cloud our sensibilities. From a rational standpoint, Orthodox are speaking of a freedom, or better, a transcendence of logical, habitual thought that keeps us grounded to this world. If the faculties that concern our emotions and reason are atmospheric, then the faculty that concerns our infallible intuition is stratospheric. The operability of the intellect, the tradition would say, is in part dependent upon a control and freedom from the atmosphere that we may be released into the stratosphere.

Since the intellect is qualitatively different than our emotional and rational capacities, say the Orthodox, then it only makes sense that it must be approached differently. Sensationalism does not affect it, for it is immovable; logical inquiry will not convince it, for it does not rely upon empirical proofs and substantiated facts. According to the Orthodox, the intellect is the center of man’s being, and it is what must be engaged if the whole of man is to be evangelized and ultimately converted. But given that the intellect may not be approached in perfunctory ways, since it itself is hardly perfunctory, it is only suitable that the Orthodox encourage a different approach to evangelism entirely. This leads us to the “continuous and sincere and immaterial prayer” Hierotheos of Nafpaktos mentioned. As St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), a well known hesychast and one time Archbishop of Thessalonica asserts in his discourse on a life of stillness,
... the intellect is not like the eye which sees other visible things but does not see itself. On the contrary the intellect functions, first, by observing things other than itself, so far as this is necessary; and this is what St Dionysios the Great calls the intellect’s “direct movement”. Secondly, it returns to itself and operates within itself, and so beholds itself; and this called by St Dionysios the intellect’s “circular movement”. This is the intellect’s highest and most befitting activity and, through it, it even transcends itself and is united with God. “For the intellect,” writes St Basil, “when not dispersed outwardly”—note that it does go out from itself; and so, having gone out, it must find a way to return inwards—“returns to itself, and though itself ascends to God” in a way this is free from delusion (“Those Who Practice a Life of Stillness”, ed. 1981, pg. 336).

The “direct” and “circular” movement that St Dionysios speaks of, the “return to itself” that St Basil enigmatically describes, in none other than the practice of “sincere and immaterial prayer”. “Prayer is communion of the intellect with God”, writes Evagrios the Solitary (c. 346-399) (“On Prayer”, ed. 1981, pg. 57). In the Orthodox Church, prayer is the method privileged and preferred to any other method of evangelism, for it is prayer that teaches us to say “Thy will be done” and that the faithful Christian should place all aspirations, circumstances, and outcomes in the hands of the Divine. Fr David Moser, a contemporary American priest, puts this very definitively:

The first and most important thing to remember is that we do not bring anyone into the Church—it’s not our job. We do not attract people to the faith, we do not convince people of the Truth, we don’t do any of that. God is the One Who attracts people, Who brings them in the door, Who convicts their hearts, Who
brings them to repentance, Who convinces them of the Truth; we do none of this. Too often in the North American model of evangelism, the individual person is made responsible for doing God's task, but in attempting to do God's work, we neglect our own (“Eastern Orthodox Christian Evangelism is Different”, 1999, para. 2).

The task of the Orthodox Christian as evangelizer is, therefore, primarily prayer. To buttress this point, St Innocent of Alaska (1797-1879), one of the first Orthodox Christians to evangelize North America, considers,

What then shall we do? How ought we to proceed when in the words of the Gospel, the harvest is great in our country . . . ? “Pray to the Lord of the harvest,” Jesus Himself teaches us (Matt. 9:38). Thus, first and foremost, we must pray. If even in everyday matters people fall back upon prayer, asking God’s blessing at the beginning of some task and then throughout asking for renewal and strength (where prayer means nothing more than “help”), here, in the matter of conversion, prayer becomes the ‘means’ itself –and a most effectual of means, for without prayer one cannot expect success even under the most perfect of circumstances. Thus it is not our missionaries alone who must pray. No, we their brethren must further their work by our own prayers (“Address to the Organizational Meeting of the Orthodox Missionary Society, 1868”, 1987, pgs. 141-142).

If it therefore seems that the Orthodox are reticent to disseminate information in the usual ways most Christians expect, that is because it is. But we should not make the mistake, say the Orthodox, and think that information is not being disseminated at all. On the contrary, information is eternally being transmitted, the Orthodox Church and its saints would say. In fact,
some of the Church’s saints, like Justin Martyr (c.100-168), declared that many were receiving the truth of the Gospel long before Christ even became incarnate\textsuperscript{7} through his eternal presence as the \textit{Logos} [\textit{λόγος}] of God. \textit{Logos} literally translates as “Word”, and is philosophically and theologically understood as the reason, rationale, and communication of God. The \textit{Logos} epitomizes evangelism as God’s most direct, effective, and informative means of communication with the world. Elsewhere, St Maximos the Confessor (c. 580-662) writes, “Always and in everything God the Logos seeks to work the mystery of His Incarnation” (Ambigua, n.d., pg. 91). The Orthodox Church relies on the dissemination of knowledge by the \textit{Logos spermatica}, to use the words of St Justin Martyr, as the method \textit{par excellence} of evangelism. “We need much knowledge so that”, St Maximos teaches, “having first penetrated the veils of the sayings which cover the \textit{Logos}, we may with a naked intellect see—insofar as men can—the pure \textit{Logos} as He exists in Himself, clearly showing us the Father in Himself” ("Second Century of Theology", ed. 1981, pg. 155). And this is of course the entire aim of true evangelism: to penetrate the veils of this world that one may see God.

\textbf{Effectiveness of Evangelism}

Turning from a discussion of theology and esoterism to more sociological and exoteric matters, let us consider just how effective the method of evangelism that the Orthodox Church embraces has been. We will begin with a well-known example of evangelism and conversion that would forever change the role of Orthodoxy in America. It took place in the late 1970’s when very few people were even aware of the Orthodox Church.

Campus Crusade for Christ is a popular collegiate ministry that began in 1951 at University of California at Los Angeles. It claims to have “a ministry presence in 190 countries,

\textsuperscript{7} Cf St Justin Martyr’s “Second Apology”.
which represents 99.6 percent of the world's population” (“CRU”, 2000-Present, 2014, para. 1). The late Fr Peter Gillquist (1938-2012) was once a member of Campus Crusade, not merely as a lay person, but as a minister, and was very familiar with the art of evangelism. In his seminal work for Orthodox converts, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*, Fr Peter wrote that at a point in his career he felt “dissatisfied—or better to say, unsatisfied—with the status quo of what [was] perceived as dull, denominational Christianity” (1989, pg. 5). As a result, Fr Peter, along with more than 260 others, abandoned his very familiar lives as evangelicals in hopes becoming satisfied by a faith that promised everything but jejune Christianity. “I had been raised in a mainline denominational Church in Minneapolis”, Fr Peter recounts.

> Among my earliest desires as a child was the desire to follow God. Sunday school and church were a given on Sunday morning. Even the non-serious kids rarely cut. I never disbelieved in God that I recall. I just got bored somewhere along the way (Ibid, pg. 9).

What followed was a search for ancient, traditional Christianity that spanned two decades. Fr Peter, like his contemporaries, had very basic questions: “whatever happened to the Church . . . read about in the New Testament? Was it still around? If so, where?” (Ibid, pg. 28).

> Fr Peter believed that he found the answers to his questions within the walls of the Orthodox Church. Following his conversion, Fr Peter asserted,

> I did not come to Orthodoxy because I was attracted by a new potential for spiritual life. I came because I was convinced biblically and historically that the teachings of the Church were correct, that this was the true faith. In the process I discovered the true spiritual depth of the Orthodox faith (Ibid, pg. 180-181).
Despite the growing dissatisfaction with his evangelical background, Fr Peter maintained up until his death that

most of us were not drawn here by any gross disenchantment with the evangelical movement, nor by an incurable preoccupation with the smells and bells attendant with Orthodox worship. . . . The change came for us when we stopped trying to judge and reevaluate Church history, and for once invited Church history to judge and evaluate us (Ibid, pg. 185).

Fr Peter’s story is constantly echoed among Orthodox converts. Though reasons for conversions are not always quite so horizontal, it can be argued that by and large, Church history, Holy Tradition, and corporate worship are the main factors that contribute to conversion, and are prominent themes in evangelism. One of the main tactics of the Orthodox evangelist, other than prayer of course, is education. Media resources like “Ancient Faith Radio”, periodicals like “Orthodox Observer”, “Orthodox Tradition”, and “Orthodoxy Today” are all examples of Orthodox promoting awareness and encouraging instruction. But despite these resources, many feel that Orthodox Christianity is “the best-kept secret in America” (Ibid, pg. 58), and many converts freely and readily admit that Orthodoxy was difficult to find. So often, it takes years of searching within other Christian denominations before Orthodoxy is happened upon; reportedly, Fr Peter’s search spanned nearly a decade.³ Fr Aris Metrakos, a priest at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in San Francisco mused, “Virtually every person whom I know who became Orthodox out of a Protestant tradition berates me (good naturedly) for keeping Orthodoxy a secret” (personal communication, February 21, 2014). The greatest reason for such “secrecy”, it seems, is the Orthodox Church’s hesitancy to evangelize in the more prevalent ways

³ For Fr Peter’s reflections on his time searching for Orthodoxy, cf. http://www.antiochian.org/content/becoming-orthodox-being-orthodox-again-interviews-fr-peter-gillquist.
that the Christians in America expect. When asked to comment on why the Orthodox Church
does not evangelize in the more perfunctory ways, as say, Catholicism and branches of
Protestantism do, Fr Aris commented,

Principally, because [such evangelism] doesn’t work. TV preachers don’t grow
individual congregations, nor does knocking on doors. Churches grow because of
good preaching, a welcoming atmosphere, good small groups programs, worship
that connects with people in the pews, etc. In the West, evangelism is an activity.
In the East it is our raison d’etre. The East retains the understanding that the
world is part of the Church. The West has the inverse perspective. As such, the
West crafts marketing strategies to make inroads in a ‘foreign country,’ while the
East hopes to shape the world through the holiness of all aspects of the life of the
Church (Ibid).

But when asked a similar question, why the Orthodox Church seems reticent to evangelize in an
outspoken manner, Fr Thomas Moore of Holy Apostles Orthodox Church of America in
Columbia, S.C., argued the contrary:

Orthodoxy is very ‘outspoken’ and evangelistic throughout history. However,
during the past century [evangelism] has been particularly difficult due to
persecution. Comparing American free evangelism to those under the communist
yoke is not fair. However, Orthodoxy is thriving and evangelizing now in many
countries where it was impossible before . . . The Orthodox Church is outspoken
and not deficient. However, conversion to a disciplined way of Christian life is
more difficult to embrace than an entertainment driven, individualistic approach.
Thus we see more numbers initially attracted to cheap grace, and many of those
Time does indeed seem to be on Orthodoxy’s side, at least as far as conversion rate is concerned. According to a 2010 religious census, “Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Orthodox Christian congregations” have grown 13 percent for Eastern Orthodox churches, and 35 percent for Oriental Orthodox churches (“U.S. Religion Census 2010: Summary Findings”, 2012). While the main factor for growth was once based upon immigration and family ties, we are now finding many adherents to be voluntary converts who did not necessarily have a prior relationship to Orthodoxy. In the U.S., nearly 33% of priests are converts themselves, according to Alexei D. Krindatch, research director at the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute in Berkeley (“Religion Today”, 2007). This figure may be credited to some of the outreach conducted by the Orthodox Church. Fr Thomas, while principally crediting the “Holy Spirit” as What draws a person to the Orthodox Church, did cite some other initiatives: “Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC) and International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) are just two examples. The Antiochian [Orthodox Church] and Orthodox Church in America both have departments of evangelization aimed at converting Americans to Orthodoxy . . .” (personal communication, March 20, 2014). The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in America is also involved in outreach initiatives. Its “Department of Outreach and Evangelism” supports organizations like the Philoptochos Society, a women’s organization aimed at ministering to women and youth. The Department of Outreach and Evangelism’s mission, states its website,
those inquiring about the Orthodox faith, and offering each community the tools for parish renewal and for the establishment of new parishes (“Department of Outreach and Evangelism”, 2014, para. 2).

When he was asked about evangelical activity, Fr Aris commented on what Orthodoxy does on a local scale:

I am . . . aware of initiatives in local congregations. These include developing ‘signature outreach ministries’ (philanthropic activities for which the parish is known), a strong web presence, relational ministries that augment a strong cycle of services, and a pastor who devotes himself to solid preaching and one-on-one time with the faithful and the inquirers (personal communication, February 21, 2014).

But despite its successful efforts, the Orthodox Church still has work to do, according to many of its adherents. In a survey conducted in 2014, more than half of the participants, the majority of whom considered themselves “very familiar” with the Orthodox Church, agreed that the effectiveness of evangelism within Orthodoxy is “fair”. While most participants (32.29%) found the most effective means of evangelism was to be associated with special events that individual churches may host (e.g. festivals, community service, hospitality), more than a quarter of participants cite literature as the most successful resources for evangelism. Just over 10% found preaching to be the most convincing outreach technique. But perhaps the most telling result from the survey that describes Orthodox evangelism best is the conclusions from the question, “In your experience, how likely is an Orthodox Christian willing to evangelize to an unknown public?” Just under 7% of participants claimed “very likely”, while 48.45% claimed “somewhat likely”, and 45.36% voted “not at all likely”, indeed suggesting Orthodoxy’s seeming
reluctance to evangelize at all. These results are consistent with the results from the question, “What best describes your introduction to the Orthodox Church?”, for most Orthodox who participated in this survey claimed that “individual study” was to be credited for an introduction to the faith, 35% more than those who cited “evangelical outreach” as their introduction to the faith (cf. “Appendix” for additional findings).

It seems safe to conclude that most felt that considerable work needs to be done in improving outreach: “As has been pointed out by others, churches are alive and, therefore, supposed to grow”, says Fr Aris Metrakos.

When a church doesn’t grow, the question should be “how are we getting in God’s way?” Typically, we do this by our use of languages other than English, poor preaching, a lack of relational ministries, infighting, having leaders who lack spiritual credibility and authority, and worship that is overly influenced by monastic rites. While liturgical renewal might not be a realizable goal in our lifetime, the other factors can be readily addressed (personal communication, February 21, 2014).

But it must be said, just because there does not seem to be an emphasis on overt advertisement of the faith, or that there is not the same questionable productivity as is found in mega churches, does not mean the Orthodox Church is not hard at work. We have already seen that the Orthodox Church places a great deal of emphasis on prayer as the primary tool of evangelism; proving how effectively it has gathered members is beyond the scope of this paper and the competencies of its authors. As the Orthodox Church would say, only God knows that. But as we can see, initiatives and outreach activities are in fact prevalent tools, and it seems that
these tools are useful in attracting people. Only time will tell just how successful they have been.

Ultimately, when asking the question “how effectual has the Orthodox Church been when it comes to evangelism”, the writers would like to recommend a different approach in answering the question. Instead of expecting evangelism in its usual package, perhaps, at least when seeking to understand the methods of evangelism within the Orthodox Church, we should redefine our usual conceptions and expectations, as has been suggested. “The real secret to evangelism lies in the heart of the believer,” Fr Thomas concludes.

St Seraphim is quoted as saying “Save your own soul and thousands will be converted.” The shame of any effort to convert is to try to convince others to do what we in fact are not doing. Effective evangelism depends on the purification of the human heart by effort and grace. That presence is like “sparks among stubble” setting fire to all it contacts (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

In our estimation, what continues to attract seekers, what continues to strike sparks, is the Orthodox Church’s emphasis on prayer, its modest presence, its unwillingness to kowtow to modernity, and its unassuming methods of evangelism. In the words of Fr Peter,

In Orthodoxy today, as in years gone by, the basics of Christian doctrine, worship, and government are never up for renegotiation. . . . The Church simply has not left her course in nearly two thousand years. She is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. She is the New Testament Church. The gates of hell have tried repeatedly, but they have not prevailed against her (“Becoming Orthodox”, 1989, pg. 57).
Appendix

Question 1: How familiar are you with the Eastern Orthodox Church?

Question 2: How long have you been familiar with the Orthodox Church?

Question 3: What best describes your introduction to the Orthodox Church?
Question 4: In your estimation, how important is evangelism within the Orthodox Church?

Question 5: Based on your experience, describe the effectiveness of evangelism within the Orthodox Church.
Question 6: What method of evangelism employed by the Orthodox Church have you found most effective?

Question 7: In your experience, how likely is an Orthodox Christian willing to evangelize to an unknown public?

Surveyors’ note: This survey was conducted with the aid of SurveyMonkey.com and through email request and social media.
Bibliography:


