Orthodox diaspora and mission

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MISSION AND EMIGRATION -- THE DIASPORA

Orthodox diaspora has been established in Southern Africa by immigrant communities, and this is true of many other parts of the world as well, particularly Australia and the eastern parts of North America.

Where such emigration of people from Orthodox countries took place, Orthodox hierarchs were usually very slow to respond to the needs of these communities, especially to such distant places as Australia. In some cases, the emigrants went as refugees, and in the circumstances in which they left their home countries, there was no opportunity for the home church to care for the needs of its emigrants, because of the crisis it faced at home. So, for example, many Arabs emigrated to America as a result of the Druze-Christian war in Lebanon in 1860, or the Zionist occupation of Palestine in the 1940s. Russians left after the Bolshevik revolution, where the church had to battle to survive at home and so on.

Orthodoxy entered China largely through a group of prisoners of war taken in a border clash between China and Russia, and continued for a long time as part of the diplomatic relations between Russia and China. It was a rather strange combination of mission as statecraft and mission as diaspora. It did not spread much among Chinese people until after the Boxer rebellion, when there was a remarkable growth for a while. Then refugees came from Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, and Orthodoxy in China took on more of a diaspora character.

In the countries from which the emigrants came, the church was an integral part of the community, but in most cases the church did not accompany people when they emigrated. Not only did emigrants find themselves in a strange land and a strange culture, but even those who shared their religion were often very different. In places like Greece, different villages and islands had different traditions and customs. When they arrived in a strange land, there was a natural desire to stick together, to have a familiar anchor. But even the familiar was unfamiliar.

It was perhaps easier for emigrants from places like Syria and Palestine, where Orthodox Christians were still a minority, though the minority mentality still clung to those who were no longer minorities in their homelands, but whose ancestors had been under Turkish rule until quite recently. In their new countries, therefore, immigrant community organisations were set up by lay leaders, and the structures were not well-defined. Class, regional and ideological antagonisms were carried over from the home countries, and disputes were common. Orthodox migrant conflicts have often assumed an intra-ethnic form, pitting fellow expatriates against each other (Doumanis 1992:61).

In the cities of Australia and South Africa, the early Greek communities were modelled on traditional forms of Greek local government, which gave rise to institutions known as koinotiteskoinotites, usually referred to in English as "communities". The same committee managed cultural, educational, sporting and religious activities. The church collections were used to fund any or all of these various activities. The koinotites jealously guarded their authority, and perceived one of the greatest threats to their authority as coming from the clergy (Doumanis 1992:65). When clergy did reach the immigrant communities, they were regarded as salaried employees of the koinotites. When the Patriarch of Constantinople decided to send a bishop to Australia in 1924 the decision was greeted with outrage by some sections of the community, and schisms resulted. The Sydney koinotia refused to allow the bishop into their church, while in Melbourne the anti-episcopal faction broke away to form a schismatic congregation elsewhere (Doumanis 1992:66).

From a purely sociological point of view, such problems were not unique to Orthodoxy, but were common in such situations. In South Africa the Anglican community was split into the Church of the Province of South Africa and the Church of England in South Africa for similar reasons, when many of those who had established Anglican churches as independent corporations would not accept the authority of the bishop of Cape Town, Robert Gray, to call a synod.
The missiological implications of this have been seen to some extent in the previous chapter, where I showed that Orthodoxy was largely inward-looking in Southern Africa, where there was a large, mainly Greek, immigrant community, whereas it grew much more rapidly in tropical Africa, where the immigrant communities were smaller and less significant.

Initially it could be said that there was a pastoral failure, rather than a missionary one. As Doumanis (1992:61) notes:

"Orthodox hierarchs were slow to respond to the religious needs of newly emerging and distant emigrant communities. The Orthodox Church possessed no effective strategies to expand its ecclesiastical structures, particularly to such distant places as Australia. The initiative instead was invariably taken up by the emigrant laity, who bought, maintained and controlled religious property. This gave the laity unprecedented powers over religious affairs, and presented considerable obstacles to later attempts by prelates to establish Church authority."

Priests, when they arrived in such a community, were often treated as salaried employees of a secular corporation, and such corporations were for the most part not interested in mission. If a priest was interested in mission, the attitude of the community was often that "that is not what he is paid to do". As time passed, and the immigrant community became more established in the new country, new problems emerged. The children and grandchildren of immigrants grew up with little knowledge of Greek, Russian, Serbian or other languages of the home country. Clergy, however, continued to be brought from overseas, and often did not speak the local language. This meant that the younger generation often grew up ignorant of the Orthodox faith, because there was no one to teach them. Where the Church authority was strong enough, and the immigrant community large enough, seminaries for local training of clergy were established, and this has gradually begun to overcome some of the problems. In the case of Russian communities the problem was realised somewhat earlier, because after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia the prospect of aid from the "home" church, whether financial or in the sending of clergy, dropped to almost nothing. Immigrant communities were also joined by exiles from the Soviet Union, often members of the intelligentsia who had been deported. One such group established a seminary in Paris, St Sergius, and later one in New York, St Vladimir?s, where the teaching was in French and English respectively.
In the case of America the situation was further complicated. The Orthodox Church there has been established as a mission in Alaska, rather than as a diaspora emigrant church. In the decades before the First World War, however, there was a flood of emigrants from various Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe and the Near East. After the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, it was clear that the Russian Church would no longer be in a position to care for them, and so the other Orthodox Churches sent bishops to America to care for their emigrant members. These bishops had overlapping jurisdictions, to such an extent that in America the term "jurisdiction" has become almost the equivalent of the Western term "denomination". So there were Russian, Greek, Antiochian, Serbian, Bulgarian and other "jurisdictions" established. Even the Russians themselves were divided. Some bishops exiled from Russia formed a synod, and eventually called themselves the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia (ROCOR) or the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (Antic 1988:137). Others set up a provisional church administration which was eventually recognised by the Moscow Patriarchate as an autocephalous church, the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) in 1970. The Patriarchate of Constantinople did not recognise the autocephaly, since it had its own (largely Greek) Archdiocese of North and South America which was in fact numerically larger than the OCA. This question of formal recognition, however, did not stop them from cooperating with each other and others through the Standing Committee of Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA), through which all support the work of the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC).

The term diaspora was originally used of Jews who were scattered among the nations after various

conquests of their country -- in Babylon, Egypt, and elsewhere. The Jewish communities of the diaspora were originally inward looking, seeking to preserve their religion, language and culture intact in a foreign land. Eventually, however, they became more integrated into the foreign society. So the Jews of the diaspora made a great contribution to Christian mission by translating the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, the lingua franca of the Eastern Mediterranean lands, thus making those scriptures accessible to a wide range of people, and available to be used by Christian missionaries in spreading the Christian faith. So diaspora is also used to describe the Orthodox Christians who emigrated from Orthodox countries in Eastern Europe to other parts of the world.

The missionary effect of the diaspora is usually a slow and delayed one. For the first generation of immigrants, the church is a link with home, and has little to do with the new country in which they find themselves. For the second generation -- those born in the new country, or who were young children when their parents emigrated, this persists, but it is modified by their exposure to the environment in the new country. They are often bilingual, having grown up speaking the language of their parents, but also using the local vernacular at school and work. Their understanding of the church and its organisation is influenced by their experience of the new country, which is not Orthodox, so they seek to run the church along the lines of a commercial corporation, and many are registered as companies.

It is with the third generation, however, that the critical point is reached. They speak the vernacular, and often don?t know the language of the home country at all. They have become detribalised. For them, the church itself is foreign and unfamiliar. They often marry local people, and may join the church of their marriage partner. If they have any religious interest, it is often awakened by people from other churches, who communicate with them in more familiar terms. They may visit the churches of friends or spouses, and there they may experience a religious conversion.

In English-speaking countries, such people have sometimes joined Roman Catholic or Anglican Churches. Anglicans tend to engage in proselytism with people of an Orthodox background, saying that their church is "the same", but just in a more culturally familiar form, and that the Anglican and Orthodox Churches are "in communion" with each other. This is not true, but it is a common belief among many Anglicans. Others may join Pentecostal or evangelical churches, which stress individual conversion, and encourage people to join them.
In such cases, one of two things may happen. One is that they repudiate their Orthodox heritage, judging what little they know of it according to the theological criteria of the group they have joined. Thus they maintain, for example, that the Orthodox "worship idols", and "don?t know Christ". They then seek to recruit their nominally Orthodox acquaintances for their new church. The other possibility is that, having had an experience of Christ in a Pentecostal or evangelical church, the things in their Orthodox background and upbringing gradually begin to make more sense. The ikons in the church that their parents lifted them up to kiss are no longer incomprehensible figures from a foreign land, but become more real to them. They realise that the Orthodox Church has more than they thought, and they return, with a new desire to learn. They buy Orthodox books, and start urging priests to use more of the vernacular language in the services. They start inviting their friends and acquaintances to go to the Orthodox church with them, and become evangelists for Orthodoxy. In such ways, the diaspora gradually turns to mission.

In North America, the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC), is an example of a mission initiative by a church that had its origin in the Orthodox diaspora. The mission centre, based in St Augustine, Florida, began as an initiative of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, is now supported by several those of other national origins as well. The OCMC collects funds for mission, and has sent short-term and long-term missionaries to Africa, Asia and Europe. Some of the long-term missionaries now working to rebuild the Orthodox Church in Albania, for example, served as short-term missionaries in East Africa first. The short-term missionaries, often in groups from different parishes, have helped to make their home churches much more aware of mission.
In some of the countries of the diaspora, there has been another effect, shown by bodies like the OCMC. The countries in Eastern Europe from which the Orthodox immigrants came were often poor.

They emigrated to make their fortunes in other countries, and by the third generation, many of the members of the diaspora communities were relatively wealthy, compared with those in the home countries. When the mission consciousness did appear, they were in a far better position to support it. In the 1960s, the St Sergius Seminary in Paris was still very much a refugee community. The students lived in the crypt under the church, with a concrete floor with a drain running down the middle of it. Their cubicles were partitioned with threadbare cloths held up by string. In North America in 1990, St Vladimir?s Seminary (an offshoot of St Sergius) has substantial buildings in spacious grounds. The diaspora has therefore often had the effect of making financial resources available for mission as well.

The Orthodox diaspora has not generally been conducive to mission. It initially often has a negative effect, as it did, for example, with the influx of Russian refugees into China after the Bolshevik Revolution, where mission was slowed as the church?s main focus shifted to ministry to the refugees (Stamoulis 1986:42). It was only after two generations that the diaspora gradually began to turn to mission and began having a positive effect.

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