

4) The American Gospel – Orthodoxy at the end of the Sawdust Trail

The American Gnostic experience is not harmless, as much as our modern unaffiliated, anti-authoritarian spiritualists fervently believe. It always turns out to be full of peril and jeopardy, and is the culprit for much of the nation's anxiety, depression, immaturity and irrationality.

The American Gnostic experience seeks to experience the divine, but *outside* the protective communion provided by Jesus Christ and His Body, the Apostolic Church.

The American experience seeks gnosis, or knowledge, outside of the Apostolic Dogma.

It seeks ecstasy, outside of the discipline of *ascesis* ... outside of the grace resident

in Eucharist, Baptism and Chrismation and all the Mysteries.

The American Gnostic urge is a romantic foray into a bodiless solitude or aloneness.

Despite its naïve enthusiasm that is the golden fleece of all romantic endeavor, this urge is really an attempt to launch out alone into the Mystical Fire, the Uncreated Light.

And as the Fathers warned us repeatedly: to enter the Uncreated Light naked, and autonomously, without the garment of righteousness granted by Baptism and bestowed under the Name of Jesus Christ ... to be so foolish and irrational ... to do this outside of the exclusive, Only-Begotten Son of God ...

This experience, shorn of its glittering signs, is just another word for Hades – perdition in the here-and-now.

This is why we protest against passion and warn against heresy. While passion makes the soul sick with the leaden shackles of spite and regret, unbelief, faithlessness and this present darkness of Gnosticism makes the soul *worse* than sick: it makes it inherently insane. It has already done so with Satan and his rebel angels.

You might be surprised at this practical effect of Gnosticism, which itself is the end-state of all heresy (including mainline arianism). There are many examples I can give, but I will give you one from a rather well-known track from a well-known rock band. Rock music is the place to go for gnostic prophecy, after all, and this particular band is articulate in that regard:

*There is no pain you are receding
A distant ship smoke on the horizon
You are only coming through in waves
Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying
When I was a child
I caught a fleeting glimpse
Out of the corner of my eye
I turned to look but it was gone
I cannot put my finger on it now
The child is grown
The dream is gone
And I have become comfortably numb*

How do we respond to this latent Gnosticism in the American genius – a latency that is now becoming more and more active and explicit?

We begin by not ignoring it, or settling for appearances.

But instead, we follow the lead of the Apostles themselves, who *also* – in their day

– faced a nascent, burgeoning Gnostic movement that consumed a significant portion of the first generations of the Church.

Their courageous, Spirit-led, ecclesiastical response is why we have the Canon of Holy Scripture today, and why we are blessed with the Doctrine of Apostolic Succession.

We should look especially to the Apostolic response to Gnosticism, which is germane in most of the Epistles, especially the First Epistle of John the Theologian.

In this simple, elegant and luminous letter, St. John emphasized the exclusivity of the Incarnate Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. St. John identified the Grace of the Holy Trinity as the Light, and that Jesus Christ is the Son of God the Father and Creator.

He emphasized that there was to be no individualized, solitary confrontation with the Infinite. Instead, we are to love our brother, to walk in the Light, and to have fellowship with the Church of Christ, and to abide in Christ as the Son of God.

Here is the lesson of First John for American Orthodoxy, in this gnostic new age:

- Enhance the teaching of dogma, even at the expense of political clarity.

- Make explicit the Tri-Personal, Single-Essential Fellowship of the Trinity vs implicit diffuse Gnosticism of the world

- Make explicit the Incarnation: the exclusive identification of Jesus Christ in His Two Natures as Saviour, vs the constant gravitational tide of Arianism in the heterodox community

- Be identified more with the dogma that we are *for*; more than the positions that we are *against*

- Enhance catechism in terms of sequence of Bible as the great narthex of dogma: every story should point to an article of the Nicene Creed ... and in turn, the Bible and the Fathers should point toward theosis and the struggle against passions

We must recognize that Orthodox dogma – Trinity and Incarnation – is not just a prerequisite for membership in our club ... it is a prerequisite for *sanity* in a decadent civilization that is driven to *insanity* by its increasing proximity to Hades

We must teach Americans the Apostolic thought-patterns of Christian symbol – not *again*, for they never really knew it, but for the very first time ... in a better way of saying the same thing, we must teach Americans how to pray – not *again*, for they have never really heard the fullness of the Theology of the Trinity and the Economy of the Incarnation ... we know this for sure, since Americans typically like to claim that they can pray outside of religion, and that dogma only ties them down: in the truth of apostolic indoctrination, one knows instead that doctrine and prayer are intertwined – indeed, they are pre-requisites of each other, and both are founded upon the ascesis of love.

(*Dogma is liberation*: and the quicker we can make that clear by our authenticity, the less miserable we will be.)

We must teach Americans how to pray in the American language: it is an album of memories of open spaces and spectacular places, of tycoons and blue-collar steelworkers and coalminers, of shopkeepers who barbecue on weekends and crowd at football games ... it is a language chock full of incomplete memories and an aversion to doctrine and philosophy, childlike, sometimes child*ish*, always hoping, usually disappointed ... it is a language of dreams and outright pagan fantasy ... it is an incomplete language – language of predicates and objects, verbs and clauses, prepositions and adjectives – a language that waits upon a Subject, a cornerstone of Orthodox Gospel ... in other words, the American language is waiting for the Word

We must teach Americans how to be Orthodox, to think Orthodox and do Orthodoxy in their own local America. Let us help Americans get over their wanderlust and demand for the greener grass and learn how to stay and pray. Let us renounce the commercial entrepreneurial claims of the Church Growth Movement and bloom where we are planted.

Finally, we must reveal to Americans the real destination of Orthodoxy at the end of the historic Sawdust Trail: a destination of Repentance and Theosis.

The only way to reveal this Sawdust Trail is Sainthood, and nothing less. Not jurisdictional unity. Not ecumenicity. Not modernization. Not liturgical reform.

Not commercialization, commodification, and selling our children to the bitch goddess of success.

It is Sainthood that is the destiny we fail at our peril: and every American knows this deep within the heart of his American Soul. How is an American to know the possibility of theosis unless he is shown the possibility of the Way, by an Orthodox American who has gone from possibility to realization?

Concluding Postscript

Newton Booth Tarkington is not to be mistaken for the 1942 Orson Welles distorted treatment of his best known novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*. This forgotten book, which used to be well-read, chronicles the conversion of Indianapolis from a city where "No one was very rich; few were very poor; the air was clean, and there was time to live" – to a "city nesting dingily in the fog of its own smoke ..." Tarkington noted that "Bigness – the god of all good American hearts" had turned his Indianapolis into a sprawling greedy place that had become "hurried, hard, unsafe, inhuman."

I would add, from the perch of my own front porch in East Pittsburgh that looks out upon an empty Westinghouse plant, that after the tragedies of industrialization and World War II, there is the even more spirit-destroying revolution of "media-zation" – whose power has grown from the press to the radio, from TV to a globalized Internet-enabled web of virtual reality.

The late Russell Kirk once wrote an essay entitled "Donald Davidson and the South's Conservatism." Kirk, in this essay, celebrates Davidson's constant call to arms against the encroachments of "Leviathan" – an especially pungent icon of "the omnipotent nation-state, what Tocqueville called democratic despotism, the political collectivity that reduces men and women to social atoms."

Kirk lauds Davidson and his other Southern Agrarian confreres who all insisted "... that society is something *more* than the Gross National Product; that the country lane is healthier than the Long Street; that more wisdom lies in *Tradition* than in Scientism; that Leviathan is a devourer, not a savior."

Those are Kirk's words – no mean rhetoric, that. But then Kirk concludes with Davidson's words from *I'll Take My Stand*:

[Some] moderns prefer to grasp the particular. They want something to engage both their reason and their love. They distrust the advice of John Dewey to 'use foresight of the future to refine and expand present activities.' The future is not yet; it is unknowable, intangible. But the past was, the present is; of that they can be sure. So they attach themselves – or reattach themselves – to a home-section, one of the sections, great or small, defined in the long conquest of our continental area. They seek spiritual and cultural autonomy ... They are learning how to meet the

subtlest and most dangerous foe of humanity – the tyranny that wears the mask of humanitarianism and benevolence. They are attacking Leviathan.

The past *was*. The present *is*. These are Orthodox words: and it is especially Orthodox to figure out that the Dewey-ite "future" of the industrialists is demonic fantasy.

Bill Kauffman, and Davidson, Russell Kirk, Wendell Berry, and "rural Catholics" and "Jeffersonian Protestants" – they worry rightly that Leviathan is succeeding. But they also point out that Leviathan can be fought. Their prescription is for the preservation of the local and the particular, in the face of leveling centralization.

I suggest, instead, that we cherish the concrete, the permanent, and the icon (which is as particular an enduring symbol can get). These words carry much of the same meaning. But they also carry the cachet of sign, sacrament, even the Chalcedonic witness of divinity and humanity unified without confusion.

From these regionalists (who actually like the word "anarchical" -- albeit in an idiosyncratic sense), Orthodox Christians in America must take good advice. It is time that we American Orthodox learn not only about Orthodoxy, but about being American -- and it appears to me that regionalists possess an American understanding that far outstrips the wan sort of historiography we've been spoonfed.

We Orthodox may think we know America, perhaps from the news or from our annual visits to Americana on Thanksgiving, July 4th and Memorial Day.

But we are mostly immigrants who arrived when industrialization was already in full swing. We have only seen the hyper-commercialized America that was served up by our big company and big party bosses, with pie-in-the-sky notions like "the American Dream."

But we Orthodox do not really know Jefferson or Lincoln, don't we? Neither do we know much about Mark Twain (except for Mssrs. Sawyer and Finn), or Frost (except for his "miles to go before I sleep")? For heaven's sake, we do not know much about Mother Jones and Dorothy Day – which a surprising thing, since most of our first immigrant forebears were much concerned with the movement of these labor marshals. We have not met the American genius, haven't we?

Consequently, we think that to be an American church we must become and do whatever the national protestant churches are becoming and doing (generally trying on their hand-me-downs in moth-eaten obsolescence).

But we miss the point that these very protestant movements have been co-opted by the *very movement* we are trying now to resist: the mega-church, on one hand, is a hyper-capitalist social structure decorated with Biblical language. The

National Council of Churches, on the other hand, is an anti-traditional socialist movement for guilty rich Westerners.

Both are signs of Leviathan.

In our attempts to "be" the American church, we discard -- sometimes with force and with regrettable Fahrenheit 451 fury -- all those smallish, embarrassing antiques from our immigrant past. We converts are much to be blamed for this "colonial" behavior. We moan like wind in the rigging about the appearance of foreign language and foreign custom in our ecclesial activities, and like peckish harpies we blame improprieties on the presence of hierarchy and Tradition, and demand a modernization of order.

Meanwhile, our very embarrassments may become our salvation, for that slavish particularity often disqualifies us from the homogenizing siren call of Leviathan -- we are left shipless on the dock, while the more attractive and sortable sorts -- the Mad Men and Desperate Housewives of less demanding denominations--are ushered into the Titanic. The very agents of our chafing -- about which we complain most (like administrative and jurisdictional chaos; inefficient coordination; the panic of suburbanites who have no bulletin with which to follow a Liturgy they cannot understand -- may become at the end the very means for our escape from this present lawless temptation ... the temptation of Leviathan to become inexorably the same -- consumers on their way to diminishing levels of ecstasy, becoming more and more part of a homogenous dehumanized matrix of the Beast.

By all means the Liturgy should be understood by the people. Sts. Cyril and Methodios taught us that much. But at the same time, God leads people through history to learn about place and person, and to grow a culture from the collection of these souvenir educations. Just as much as the South should retain grits and her drawl and the country should rediscover her agrarian liberty ... so should we immigrant Orthodox become American Regionalists by reveling in the very things that too many earnest evangelism experts urge us to discard.

Traveling to the heart of a nation is what the two Thessalonians did, with grace. We have not yet completed this journey. And really, we have far to go. We thought the heart of America was in Washington DC or New York. We thought we needed some single office that would speak for all Orthodox to American politicians. This is nice balderdash: for one thing, American politicians never listen to religious leaders ... for another thing, who can speak for all Orthodox Christians in America except God?

Neither city is anywhere near the America we need to love.

Just because we have not yet met the heart of America, her "genius" (in the old sense of the word), we do not notice the coalescing of Leviathan, the servile unification of Wall Street and the State. We watch the red downward arrows and

listen to "Stormy Weather" dirges on market reports, and we track the elected stars of the political Olympus like horoscopes in People magazine, and we think we understand the American moment.

No, we do not.

We must *know* Orthodoxy and America to be the American Orthodox Church. I worry that we do not, nearly enough for either, *just yet*.

We must know more of Leviathan to fight it. We must know more of America to save it. We must know more of Orthodoxy, in faithfulness, to *proclaim* it – existentially, authentically, mystically, naturally and supernaturally, *face to face*. For Leviathan, after all, must be fought. Leviathan denies the Incarnation: it must deny, for the Incarnation always disrupts its Tower-building and frustrates the language of virtual reality and reveals it as just so much Babel-ish.

The Incarnation is the supreme Local Event, as the Resurrection is Cosmic in Mind and Time.

Leviathan, all grown up, is the Beast. The Church in her Orthodox American concreteness, as local, agrarian, American Gothic, ethnic and folkish, must take her stand.

The heart of America is further than you think, if you think it is somewhere else or some other time. The heart of America is your backyard, your town, your block, your parish with all its foibles and warts and pirohi, and men and women about whom you sometimes complain, but to whom you will bow one day in the vicinity of theosis.

What America received of Christianity before Orthodoxy was a truncated vision ... an abbreviation, at best, of the Gospel.

But what America needs now is the full-fledged Wisdom that apprehends Natural Law, and the Apostolic *theoria* that proclaims Jesus Christ and His *present* millennial Kingdom.

I did not mean to be so dark about the American prospect. The commercial America and the globalized America, the hyper-technologized and media and World Wide Web broadcast America is probably as dark, or even darker than what we've let on.

But in every American there is still the native land and a hope for the old Republic, with the beautiful spacious skies like a starry roof over the home of the brave. You can still see this in your own people, as they pray together, work and laugh together, comfort each other in their mutual sadness and play softball on the summer diamond.

To illustrate the dark desert of Gnosticism, I quoted a haunting, but mournful lyric from the rock scene. To end all this on a more positive, hopeful note, I'd like to quote a rather famous musician, who in his own short words inimitably sums up the American who stands in the Macedonian vision.

His name is Bruce Springsteen, and I heartily recommend, for your research into the American genius, that you listen to his last three albums.

In a recent interview with *Rolling Stone* (no. 1071, 2/5/09), Springsteen said this about the sad recent loss of his keyboard player Danny Federici, and about loss in general:

That's just life, and it all goes on without you. The acknowledgement of time, its effects – on a good day, it's a sweetener. It makes every element of the day come to life a little more than it normally would. Because you realize it's finite – everything around you, the band, the family. In a not very long period of time, someone else will be living in this house, driving these roads. Somebody may go, 'Hey, Bruce Springsteen used to live there.' And in a little bit longer than that, they ain't gonna be saying that anymore. They're just going to be driving by ... That's the way the cards is played.

Not all Americans are Gnostics, especially ones who are old enough and reflective enough to look *close*ly at Time and Space, Moment and Place.

Many of them, even without really knowing, are walking down the sawdust trail, coming forward because they are looking for a deeper dream than riches, and a beauty and wisdom that explains the heartbreaking sunsets of September, the smell of new mown hay and the secret joys of baseball and barbecue. They are coming forward for they have sensed something eternal in the particularities of America, and they have figured out that there is a Creator God Who is Good.

They are coming forward down the old sawdust trail. And this time, it is not the old brown church in the vale.

It is the church of two Thessalonians, which has finally arrived in the heartland: it has finally understood the language of the call of the Macedonian, who looked strangely like John Wayne. That church, now understanding, has finally arrived.