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Piecing it Together: Spiritual Tinkering from an Orthodox Perspective

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Piecing it Together: Spiritual Tinkering from an Orthodox Perspective

Abstract

Book Summary: Churches in the U.S. are grappling with unprecedented change. Financial challenges, globalization, the digital revolution and church-dividing topics are taking a toll on the institution and membership. Americans are increasingly not affiliating themselves with any religion, including one third of adults under 30.

In light of all this, what is the future of the churches? In *For Such a Time as This: Young Adults on the Future of the Church*, Christian young adults offer an invigorating, new, and timely word on issues such as eco-justice, immigration, interfaith relations, peace and justice, and inclusivity of those on the margins.

Lohre and her contributors -- representing a broad spectrum of cultures, races, and Christian traditions -- offer a mutual exchange of ideas, experiences, and insights. More than a collection, however, this project is designed for intergenerational study and discussion. It offers a starting place for thinking about and moving towards the future together. Enter in and discover fresh wisdom, fresh thinking, and fresh ideas for the churches in the twenty-first century. *From the Publisher*

Chapter Summary: In light of growing religious pluralism in the United States, the idea of using LEGO as a way to approach the ever-evolving spirituality of young adults is approached from an Orthodox Christian perspective.

Keywords

religion, spirituality, Christianity, Orthodox Christians, LEGO

Disciplines

Christian Denominations and Sects | Christianity | Comparative Methodologies and Theories | Practical Theology | Religion

Piecing It Together

Spiritual Tinkering from an Orthodox Perspective

R. C. MIESSLER

Lego as Spiritual Metaphor

As a quiet, introverted kid, Legos were my favorite toys. I could create, change, and end entire worlds in an afternoon. When getting a new set, I always created what the instructions intended. After a few days of play, however, I would explore new configurations, adding in bricks from other sets. In recent years, I have started collecting Legos again, and the complexity of the sets today is astounding. Even so, the underlying concept is still there: the pieces are universal, interlock with each other, and can easily be taken apart. I can take the Lego sets I have acquired in the last few years and mix them up with my childhood collection, and everything will fit together.

The Lego philosophy is an appropriate metaphor for my spiritual journey. I was born to a Methodist mother and Episcopalian father, and spent most of my formative years in very conservative independent nondenominational Christian churches. After taking a church history class in college, I began to explore the Eastern

Orthodox Church, and I was received as a convert in 2003.¹ Several years later, I attended a liberal Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) seminary, where I studied ecumenism and desired to find a way to form bridges between evangelical Protestant and Eastern Orthodox Christians. In recent years, I have grown fond of the worship and social action of The Episcopal Church.

I admire cradle-to-grave Christians, but I am a spiritual tinkerer, and in this I am not alone. More and more religious people are becoming spiritual tinkerers, piecing together a spirituality that makes sense to them. Some of us have no permanent church home—others are happily rooted in a tradition yet bring in pieces from other traditions. As an Eastern Orthodox Christian, I am a member of a church that considers itself to be “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”; and as a spiritual tinkerer, I believe there is much to be gained from both tradition and creative engagement with other practices.

Changes in the Church

Today institutional religion is losing influence. The Pew Forum’s research on religious affiliation showed that in 2012 nearly 20 percent of U.S. adults considered themselves unaffiliated with any religious tradition.² While this group, labeled the “nones” or “unaffiliated,” includes around six percent who identify as atheist and agnostic, it also includes those who consider themselves religious or spiritual—though only 10 percent are actively looking for an organized religious group to join. Of significance as well is that almost one-third of 18 to 29-year-olds consider themselves unaffiliated, the largest percentage of any age group.³ Those in the United States, and increasingly younger Americans, are moving away from the religious structures that dominated the twentieth century, seeking spiritual insight outside of religious institutions.

Protestant denominations have been quick to raise questions about how to adapt to today’s rapidly changing religious landscape. At the same time, however, some Christians are more concerned about maintaining the traditions of their faith, which often

include institutional structures. The Eastern Orthodox Church is one such tradition. Orthodoxy places emphasis on the idea of apostolic succession—that all clergy have been ordained in an unbroken line since Jesus chose the apostles. Therefore, the institution and structure of the Orthodox Church is a matter of theology and cannot easily be changed. This creates tension between the urge of Orthodox Christians to retreat into a structured, institutional faith and the general shift among many other American Christians to push back against their institutions as imperfect, impermanent constructs that can and should be reformed.

In 2011 Alexei Krindatch, an Orthodox sociologist, published the first census of Orthodox Christians in the United States. It is a comprehensive look at the demographics and beliefs of Orthodox Christians in America, including attitudes about changes in the faith and perceptions of the future of Orthodoxy in the United States. The census indicates nearly two-thirds of the laity believe that the clergy must uphold the traditions of the Orthodox faith without deviation, while the rest feel that priests must be open to change and adapt Orthodox traditions. Out of the laity who considered themselves to be moderate or liberal, however, 74 percent believe clergy must be open to change.⁴ The survey of the laity also indicates that 21 percent feel that Orthodox Christians are too tied to the past, and 29 percent believe the church is making good steps toward change and progress.⁵ Only 16 percent feel that parishes should explore new forms and patterns of liturgical life, and 19 percent agreed that individual Orthodox Christians should be free to interpret Scripture and tradition on their own, and to tolerate the interpretations of others.⁶

Orthodox Christians are increasingly concerned about the relationship between American culture and the traditions and practices of the Orthodox Church.⁷ Interestingly, older Orthodox Christians were found to be more in favor of open interpretation and toleration, while younger Orthodox are more interested in maintaining traditional beliefs, believing that the Orthodox Church needs to look to the past and return to traditional beliefs and practices.⁸ This was not the result expected by the census,

as it was hypothesized that the younger faithful would be more in favor of change. In general, other religious youth tend to be more experimental, with a more irreverent attitude toward tradition and a willingness to tinker, or to bring seemingly disparate parts of various spiritual traditions together into a form that helps them make sense of their spiritual journeys. While Orthodox youth may be more inclined toward a conservative approach toward their faith, other Christians are more likely to tinker and experiment, using Orthodox Christianity as inspiration; therefore, Orthodox Christians need to be aware of the nature of religious tinkering so they can understand why other Christians are drawn to their faith without officially converting to Orthodoxy.

Spiritual Tinkering

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes the approach that many young adults take to religion as “tinkering.”⁹ They take what they need from culture, utilizing whatever resources they need to create sense out of the uncertainties of life. Improvisation and drawing from the experiences of others become the norm for problem solving.¹⁰ Wuthnow writes, “Ordinary people are not religious professionals, who approach spirituality the way an engineer might construct a building. They are amateurs who make do with what they can.”¹¹ If young adults are having less exposure to organized religion as they grow up, the path that religion can often provide is less defined than it was for their parents.

Wuthnow does not want to characterize all young adults as tinkerers; people of all ages are tinkerers, and some do not participate in spiritual tinkering at all.¹² However, he does feel that the “typical” young adult today participates in religious tinkering. The extent of tinkering varies. Some young adults may, for example, believe traditional Christian doctrines, yet they do not participate in a traditional worship experience on Sunday morning or even belong to a church. Wuthnow writes, “The core holds steady, persuading one that the Bible is still a valuable source of moral insight, for example, but the core is amended

almost continuously through conversations with friends, reflections about an especially meaningful experience on vacation or at work, or from a popular song.”¹³ It is not enough to encounter God in church for an hour on Sunday morning, but to find God in anything that inspires them. To support this, tinkerers have used the Internet to create virtual, grassroots religious and spiritual congregations, where people can form communities and discuss the issues that impact them.

The danger of tinkering can be found in its lack of context. Piecing together various religious doctrines and practices may remove them from their intended place in history and space. However, it can also serve to reinvent these concepts or introduce them to people who may never have been exposed to them in the first place. It is important, therefore, for the tinkerer to remain connected to the past and conscious of the context out of which the various doctrines and practices are plucked. Protestants who draw from concrete components of Orthodox worship, such as candles and icons, and liturgical elements such as prayers and orders of service, have likely been exposed to these elements before, sometimes even in their own traditions.

Shortly after being received into the Orthodox Church, I attended a Methodist service with my parents. During Communion, an icon of Christ was brought out as a focal point. This was one of the first times I had noticed seeing an icon used in Christian worship outside of an Orthodox service, and it was jarring at first. However, it was interesting to see that icons were not something unique to the Orthodox faith, and it gave me one of my first real exposures to how other traditions might use Orthodox spiritual practices to enrich their own discipline. It is rare to find Protestants who attempt to recreate Orthodox worship word for word and action for action. Instead, elements of Orthodox worship are placed alongside contemporary worship bands, interpretive dance, and evangelical preaching and Bible teaching. In this sense, these Christians are truly attempting a universal experience by drawing from the traditions of the entire church throughout time and space. Orthodox Christians do not have a monopoly on

their worship practices and theological viewpoints—they belong to the entire church, and the tinkerers understand this.

Theologian Leonard Sweet believes the attraction of younger Protestants to Eastern Orthodoxy is because they want an “interactive, immersive” experience in worship.¹⁴ Christians raised in a media-rich environment are discovering how Orthodox Christianity engages the senses in worship.¹⁵ However, Christian tinkerers may not feel at home in either Protestant or Orthodox churches, so they are creating something that speaks to their ultimate concerns, paying tribute to the beliefs, doctrines, and practices that bring them close to God. If Protestants are drawing from Orthodox practices but not engaging in dialogue with Orthodox Christians, they are missing a chance to be part of a larger conversation, just as Orthodox Christians who refuse to engage in dialogue with Protestants are missing out on understanding what the future of Christian faith might look like. Both sides have a chance to be part of a dialogue, based in the idea of ancient-future Christian faith.

Ancient-Future Christianity

Orthodoxy embodies the ancient faith, providing an experience of Christian mystery, community, and symbol dating back to the Byzantine Empire. I have heard the Orthodox Church described as a “time machine,” where worshippers step into a church and are sent back a thousand years. While it is an amazing trip, eventually Christians need to return to the present, and it can be jarring to move between the ancient faith held by the Orthodox and the realities of American society today. Orthodoxy cannot be a “living museum” of Christian faith if it wants to survive, and it must be willing to evolve and change as it engages new cultures, not simply carry on as it always has.¹⁶

The late theologian Robert Webber’s concept of “ancient-future Christianity” attempts to create “a dialogue between the old and the new.”¹⁷ I appreciate the concept of ancient-future in my own spiritual life, as it is a convergence of different ways

of looking at faith: the ancient is moving into the future, while simultaneously, the future is looking to the past. This way of looking at Christianity does not leave the past behind, nor does it change simply for the sake of doing something new; instead, it is a forward-looking way of faith that is rooted firmly in the past. The ancient Christian practices and doctrine form a foundation for the future of the faith while not remaining stuck in the past, unwilling or unable to change.

Unfortunately, many Christians (not only the Orthodox) are so wedded to a concept of an ancient and unchanging faith that they are failing to address the needs of the faithful today. Other Christians want change to the point that they are willing to give up the past in order to move forward. Both of these extreme approaches are problematic; ancient Christians unwilling to move forward are left behind, and future-facing Christians with no anchor in the past quickly lose momentum. As a spiritual tinkerer, I believe that we can serve as bridge builders between the ancient and the future, probing history in search of the common faith that has been present throughout Christianity in all cultures.

The use of ancient faith practices can act as a stabilizer in times of rapid change. Yet it is not enough for Protestants to reach into Orthodoxy—Orthodox Christians must also reach out to Protestants, seeking dialogue and mutual enrichment. Without this exchange, the risk is that ancient spiritual practices may be appropriated as yet another “gimmick” in an already consumer-driven church model that seeks to get people in the pews (or, as it were, stadium seating). Without serious reflection on the theology behind them, it is possible that a penchant for ancient Christian practices will simply fade away, a fleeting fad.

Orthodox Christian Tinkerers?

Orthodox priest and theologian Alexander Schmemmann describes the Orthodox situation in the West as “schizophrenia.” Schmemmann is convinced that Orthodox Christians are living a double life—that of Eastern Christians on Sunday morning and of West-

ern Americans the rest of the week. This leads them to believe that they are preserving Orthodox traditions, even though they are entrenched in the Protestant ethos of American public life.¹⁸ While Orthodox Christians celebrate the divine liturgy of the East, worship in buildings based on Byzantine architecture, and hold to the teachings of the church fathers, they generally embrace the concepts of pluralism, democracy, and the civic religion of America.

This is not to say that the values of American culture and society are antithetical to Orthodox beliefs, but it does challenge the idea of truth being preserved entirely in the Orthodox Christian faith—that it is indeed the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Of course, there are many ways to interpret that phrase in the Nicene Creed. The Eastern Orthodox Church could be considered that “one church,” with all other Christians in error, or it could be a mystical concept of a unified body of believers that transcends denominational differences. I prefer to believe in the latter, as do other Orthodox Christians, but we are in the vast minority.

Is it really possible to be an Orthodox tinkerer? I believe that many already tinker in some fashion, bringing the occasional element from another Christian tradition—or sometimes another religion entirely—into their daily lives. However, this all seemingly comes to a halt in the narthex on Sunday morning, when the divine liturgy begins. Perhaps most Orthodox Christians—content with ancient worship, beliefs, and practices—are not inclined to become spiritual tinkers. Yet at the very least, I would urge Orthodox Christians to attend services of other traditions from time to time throughout the year. My own spiritual journey has been richly enhanced by attending Protestant and ecumenical worship services. Recently, I have made it a habit to attend services at an Episcopal church on Christmas Eve. I also draw from contemplative activities of Zen Buddhism and the interpretation of Torah in Judaism. Of course, every tinkerer will have their own sources they will draw from; some of my Orthodox friends have found inspiration in Catholic monasteries, Pentecostal praise music, and Rastafarianism.

The Orthodox may not be tinkerers for the most part, but they do play a role in it, by acting as exemplars of ancient Christian practices and belief. Even if Orthodox Christians are concerned about changes in the church, they can still work with other Christians who are interested in how they can use the ancient faith of the church to enhance their own spiritual journeys. It is charitable, then, for Orthodox Christians to act as mentors and guides, to show other Christians the treasures they hold on to and how to use them responsibly. In this sense, Orthodoxy is the guest at the diverse banquet of these various Christians who let the Orthodox traditions into their lives, not the host who controls every detail and sets the tone. In turn, other Christians should be charitable toward the Orthodox, not expecting them to change to conform to their expectations, taking the gifts that the Orthodox can offer without distorting them, and always acknowledging their source.

Eventually the Orthodox Church is going to have to seriously consider the same issues that have become of vital importance in other churches: ordination of female pastors, the role of LGBT members in the church, an increasing awareness of religious plurality, and the growing demographic of atheists and agnostics. This is not to say Orthodoxy has not discussed these topics, or that all Orthodox Christians hold the same beliefs. The clergy and laity of Orthodoxy cover the gamut, from very conservative to very liberal, much like any other religious tradition. However, if Krindatch's census is any indicator, most Orthodox Christians do not consider these to be negotiable, at least right now, and it is uncharitable to push Orthodoxy to make these issues the primary points of discussion.

The Orthodox Church in the United States has several challenges it needs to overcome in the next few decades. To name one, the question of ethnic identity has to be addressed, as the various national Orthodox jurisdictions in the United States determine what it will take to transform into an American Orthodox Church headed by one patriarch, with a common language for the divine liturgy on Sundays. I am hopeful that this and other

issues, such as a common date for Easter, will be addressed in time. However, while I do not advocate pushing the Orthodox Church to the brink of schism in order to bring change, as has happened in some Protestant mainline denominations, I do feel that we need to be more proactive in working to find ways to engage the culture around us.

Lego Christianity and Tinkering

When considering the reality of religious pluralism in the United States, as well as tendencies of youth to engage in spiritual tinkering, my mind returns to the Lego concept to understand the creative ways Christians today express their faith. Traditional Christians have similarities to Lego users who build only the model in the instructions with no deviation. Some more adventurous Christians have set aside the instructions, preferring to mix everything in one giant tub and build new creations of their own. While some Christians may be concerned about the problem of syncretism, or creating a new religion out of seemingly disparate traditions, Christianity has successfully found ways to become relevant to various cultures, absorbing various customs and practices while maintaining its core doctrines.

I doubt that Christian tinkerers are actively seeking to create a new religion or to convert themselves away from Christianity. The foundation of Christian faith is still there, but tinkerers are trying to build on it, just as Lego builders rely on the philosophy that all bricks can connect with each other. If we truly believe that Christianity is a catholic, or universal, faith, then we should not be worried that other religions and spiritual practices will undermine it. Yet Christian tinkerers need to be charitable, as not all Christians have the same views on appropriating practices and beliefs from other traditions. Sometimes the tinkerer needs to respect the spiritual needs or boundaries of others.

Just as my own fascination with Legos has been rekindled in recent years, I have noticed that my generation is a nostalgic one. We search for long-lost toys and fondly remembered television

shows. This occurs in other generations as well, but I think this impulse has been amplified in the digital age. Young adults want to maintain this connection to the past by procuring relics that remind us of a simpler time. It is easy to have this same nostalgia for a simpler Christianity, as evidenced by various restoration and primitivism movements that have cropped up over time. In reality, the history of the church is messy, full of dissension, and rarely straightforward. There is, in short, no simpler time to which we can return.

Today, when I look at the Orthodox Church, I see an expression of Christian faith based in the historical context of the medieval Eastern Roman Empire, a tradition that emerged and endured despite schisms, repression, and war. The survival of Orthodoxy is a testament to the faith of millions of Christians who brought their faith through the horrors of genocide and communism. I understand the need felt by many Orthodox Christians to hold on tightly to the traditions of the past, since there have been so many who have tried to take them away. However, by clinging to the past, Orthodoxy will have a difficult time engaging in conversations with those who look to the future.

I cannot see other Christian traditions as being deviations from Orthodoxy, but rather as ways Christian faith has developed in various cultures, and in turn, how Christianity has influenced those cultures. Orthodoxy took various elements of Byzantine imperial culture, including art, architecture, and vestments, and adapted them to be ways of worshipping God and providing a structure for religious faith. It only makes sense that the Orthodox Church continue to find ways to engage culture and appropriate it toward its ends—spreading the gospel, feeding the hungry, helping the sick, championing the oppressed.

Even though I have spent nearly ten years in the Orthodox Church, I feel its hold on me starting to waver, and even though it has served as a foundation for my spiritual growth over the last decade, I am more and more content to tinker. I see the pull of the Orthodox Church on me as akin to a gravitational force. My orbit around the Orthodox Church is decaying, and the potential

for me to break gravity's pull and be thrown onto a tangential path is greater and greater. However, I take comfort in that there are other forces that draw me near.

In the geometric concept of an elliptical orbit, there are two foci that guide the path of the object, each playing a vital role in the path it takes. I imagine that the Orthodox Church will always be one of my foci, but there are too many influences on my religious faith to claim that there can only be one center for this journey, and just as with an orbit, eventually I will swing closer back to the Orthodox focal point. But for now, I am content to build new creations, to tinker, to continue my spiritual journey with a strong Orthodox foundation, yet probe what it means to be part of the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." And to that I say, "*Kyrie eleison.*"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What has your faith journey been like? Are you a spiritual tinkerer? Why or why not?
2. How does your tradition respond to spiritual tinkering? What are the benefits and risks?
3. What spiritual practices (if any) does your local church borrow from other traditions? How does this impact your worship experience?
4. What cultural practices does your church uphold? Do you see benefits to maintaining these practices? What challenges would happen if they were to change?
5. What do you think about the future of Christianity in the United States in light of current trends?

NOTES

1. Alexei Krindatch's census of Orthodox Christians in the United States shows that as of 2008, 29 percent of the members of the Greek Orthodox Church Archdiocese of America and 51 percent of the Orthodox Church in

America are converts from a non-Orthodox worldview. Alexei D. Krindatch, *The Orthodox Church Today* (Berkeley, CA: Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, 2011), <http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/research/OrthChurchFull-Report.pdf>, 7.

2. "The Global Religious Landscape: Religiously Unaffiliated," *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, December 18, 2012, accessed April 23, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-unaffiliated.aspx>.

3. "'Nones' on the Rise: Executive Summary," *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, October 9, 2012, accessed April 23, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

4. Krindatch, *The Orthodox Church Today*, 58.

5. *Ibid.*, 89.

6. *Ibid.*, 102.

7. *Ibid.*, 176.

8. *Ibid.*, 90.

9. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 13.

10. *Ibid.*, 14.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 134.

13. *Ibid.*, 215.

14. Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2000), 72.

15. Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 210.

16. Brian McLaren, "Church Emerging: Or Why I Still Use the Word *Post-modern* but with Mixed Feelings," in Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 151.

17. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 7.

18. Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 205-7.