Spiritualities Old and New: Similarities between Eastern Orthodoxy & Classical Pentecostalism

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Introduction: General Disparities and Similarities

Could there be a more diverse pairing in Christendom than North American Classical Pentecostals and the Eastern Orthodox? The Orthodox esteem aesthetics, as is evident in their iconography, architecture, symbolism, liturgy, and the Palamite delineation of panentheism.\(^1\) Pentecostals are mostly devoid of an aesthetic awareness and instead have historically preferred plain and symbol-free forms of architecture and worship. The Orthodox are resolutely ecclesial: Jesus instituted, and is the mystical fountain of, the church, the mysteries, the priesthood, the liturgy, and icons. If one is to encounter Jesus Christ, he or she will do so through those established means.\(^2\) Sadly, Pentecostals are ambiguous about ecclesiology. Western in orientation, their emphasis is upon individual encounter


with Christ. Historically characterized by a deep undercurrent of anti-Catholic sentiment, Pentecostals are generally wary of concepts like the priesthood, the institutionalized church, and sacraments. Not only are these groups seemingly theologically disparate, both groups view one another warily, at best. Since the fall of Communism and the ensuing rise of religious liberties, Pentecostals have been actively evangelizing in Eastern Europe. This has resulted in the Orthodox accusing Pentecostals (and others) of both poaching and conspiring against Orthodoxy. Conversely, the Pentecostals believe the indigenous Orthodox have unfairly utilized state-church relations to exclude foreigners.

Pentecostals tend to view Orthodoxy as Roman Catholicism’s twin sister; Orthodoxy may reflect a semblance of Christian truth, but is overly committed to an ancient culture and too constricted by a lifeless liturgical form to be of any consequence for contemporary life. Furthermore, many Pentecostals have dismissed the idea that Eastern European peoples, apart from the influence of Western missionaries, could ever be Christian. For example, predisposed by their traditional eschatological hermeneutic, one historically exacerbated by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (xenophobia fueled many twentieth century eschatological schemes), Pentecostals tend to view the Russian populace as though it had accepted Marxist Socialism’s atheism in toto. For their part, Orthodox priests and lay people, if they know anything at all about Pentecostals, consider them as one more subsection of the Evangelical or Charismatic groupings. A former eminent Orthodox the-

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3 From 1914 to 1981 the Assemblies of God (AG) sent three missionaries to Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the AG has sent twenty eight missionaries (interview with the AG’s missions office, March 1997).

4 Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg said, “What proof does one need in order to understand that against Russia, against the Russian people, a dirty war, well paid, well prepared, unceasing and bitter, is being waged. . . by devilish instigators. . . . It is time that we learn to live trusting in God and ourselves. Nobody beside us can do the difficult but necessary work for the rebirth of Russia.” Ioann, “The West Wants Chaos,” in Christianity after Communism: Social, Political, and Cultural Struggle in Russia, ed. Niels C. Nielsen Jr., (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 110-11.

5 Hereafter these will be noted simply as Orthodox and Pentecostals. This is not to ignore the varying ethnic, cultural, and theological (Chalcedonian vs. non-Chalcedonian) manifestations of Orthodoxy, or the varying ethnic, cultural, and theological (Trinitarian vs. Oneness) manifestations of Pentecostalism.

6 Russia is often viewed as the great anti-Christian nation “Gog and Magog” of Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation 16:12.