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An Orthodox Mission
To Indigenous Peoples

Reviewing Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission, by Michael Oleksa

During the late 1950s I toured the Russian Orthodox Church in Fort Ross, California, which marked the southern-most penetration of Russian settlers along the northern Pacific coast during the age of discovery. Following that brief visit, I had given no further attention to the American history of Orthodoxy until the summer of 2002 when a brief excursion along Alaska’s southeastern coast extended my knowledge of the Russian Orthodox impact upon North America. I visited three of the tourist stops: St. Nicholas Church in Juneau, the Orthodox Cathedral in Sitka, and the restored Bishop’s House in Sitka, now owned and managed, except for the chapel, by the National Park Service.

The background for understanding these places was provided by Michael Oleksa’s book, Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission, which was brought to my attention at a bookstore in Juneau, and by a brief conversation in a second bookstore with the author’s daughter Ekatrina Oleksa.

The author, for thirty years an Alaskan Orthodox missionary and since 1996 dean of St. Herman’s Seminary in Kodiak, begins with two longstanding principles of Orthodox Christian mission: that the Logos of God is to be incarnated into the language and customs of a country and that an indigenous church is to be developed that will “sanctify and endorse the people’s personality.” Oleksa shows that Orthodoxy became an “integral part” of indigenous Native American culture in Alaska and
claims that this is the only place in America where Orthodoxy and an American culture have become so integrated. He proposes that an American Orthodox theology of mission should originate from Alaska to serve the rest of the nation and “contribute to the clarification of Orthodox theology for the entire universal Church as well.”

Oleksa gives a truncated account of Russian exploration and occupation of the Aleutian archipelago and southeast coast, noting that military and commercial activities were destructive of indigenous cultures. The monks and other representatives of the Orthodox Church, however, came with a different purpose. Their spirituality provided positive connections with Native American attitudes. They studied Native American religions with a sympathetic attitude and defended Native people from Russian exploitation, especially in the Kodiak region. The result was that nearly all of the people around Kodiak were baptized during the first two years of the mission, establishing a church of some 7,000 people. The Orthodox influence spread among other Native peoples and the church became well established among them.

This period of Alaskan history reaches its climax in the life and work of John Veniaminov, a missionary priest who developed a written form of Native languages, translated portions of the Bible, created schools, and served Alaska in other, more secular ways. He later became bishop of Alaska, Metropolitan of Moscow, and in time was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church as “St. Innocent, Enlightener of the Aleuts.” As late as 1902, the Orthodox Diocese of Sitka consisted of 11,758 members, all of them from the indigenous peoples except for 87 Russians and 22 others of various ethnic backgrounds.

As Oleksa develops the history, Orthodoxy in Alaska then suffered a long period of suppression directly related to the transfer from Russian to American sovereignty. The Indian policies used elsewhere in the United States were brought to Alaska with the explicit purposes of undermining native cultures and economies and transforming the native peoples into regular Americans. The programs for accomplishing these purposes included boarding schools and the forced separation of children from their families.

Oleksa shows that one of the results of these policies was that the indigenous people ceased to be self-sufficient and became dependent upon
governmental aid for their survival. If there is a counterpart during this period to St. Innocent, it is Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian missionary who contributed mightily to Alaska’s public life as the Orthodox saint had done in his time. As Oleksa tells the story, however, Jackson destabilized Native cultures as thoroughly as Veniaminov had confirmed and enhanced them.

A second destabilizing factor is the combination of modernity and secularism. Together, they attacked traditional values of the indigenous peoples and destroyed the effectiveness of traditional modes of economic life. What American Indian policies failed to do, American machines and business practices are now achieving.

Oleksa describes the Orthodox Church in Alaska as “an indigenous institution outside the orbit of American secular culture,” and because of this quality it has an important mission to American Orthodoxy. Alaskan Orthodoxy proclaims the spiritual unity that connects all aspects of life in the world, clearly a strong counter witness to the fragmented modern world in which each sphere—“economic, social, political, spiritual, sexual, public, private”—operates “according to its own norms and logic.” Alaskan Orthodoxy demonstrates that the Orthodox Church in each area of the nation can be multicultural. The strong tendency to maintain ethnic enclaves—Greek, Syrian, Russian, etc.—goes counter to the claims of the gospel and the essential ethos of Orthodoxy. The Alaskan church shows a better way.

Although much Orthodox theology and liturgical practice is difficult for me to understand, Oleksa presents two lines of thought that appeal to me.

The first is that the indigenous peoples thought of themselves as being “Real People.” They were less interested in teaching their young survival skills than the marks of authentic personhood. “Every traditional society identifies itself as authentically human by specific and, it is believed, eternally fixed criteria. The Real People have their unique way of life. When the first people were created, they were given special instructions, special knowledge, which had to be transmitted to each succeeding generation. Only by living according to these standards could any individual attain genuine personhood, and only to the extent that the entire group strove
toward this end could it succeed in its subsistence activities. Only Real People actually survive” (101).

The second idea relates more specifically to the Eucharist, which Oleksa uses to illustrate a religious view of time that one finds among indigenous people in Alaska, and many other places. “While secular cultures know nothing of this kind of time, it remains the temporal matrix for all religious experience. In the Christian faith, the most important collective action of the community is the celebration of the Eucharist. It matters not at all to what theology a believer subscribes, whether one considers the eating and drinking only a ‘memorial meal’ or a miraculous transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The point here is that whatever the apostles received in the upper room in Jerusalem about 33 A.D. is the same reality that the believer receives in church. The time of day and day of the week are of no importance while one is receiving the sacrament. What matters is that the believer enters into the experience of the disciples and participates in the same mystical supper, despite the geographic distance and the centuries that separate the communicant from the event; for the event, being of eternal significance, is new ‘past’ but always present, always accessible” (104).

This paragraph is the most radically ecumenical statement about the Eucharist that I can remember seeing. It cuts away the theological explanations and elaborations that have developed throughout the history of the church, theologies that define church communities and separate them from one another. Although Orthodox convictions about the church insist that only those who are in union with the Orthodox Churches may be received at the table, and make that union dependent upon theological agreement, this paragraph from Oleksa’s book could persuasively be used to open every communion table to all of the faithful, except for those who are denied a place because of their sinful behavior.

This account of Orthodoxy in Alaska generates questions for the general reader. First, how does the Orthodox mission to indigenous peoples of Alaska compare with Roman Catholic missions to other indigenous peoples in Mexico? Mexican Catholicism represents the cultural accommodation of Spanish religion and many of the religious and other cultural elements of the people who already possessed this region. It is well known that the Spanish conquerors, including missionaries, were oppres-
sive, often with great cruelty, and yet their religion took root among the people. According to Oleksa’s narrative, the Russian missionaries avoided much of the oppressiveness of their Catholic counterparts. How else did these two examples of indigenization compare and contrast?

A second question concerns the role of the Orthodox Church in contemporary Alaska. Despite their distinguished histories, the churches in the two places I visited struggle to maintain their buildings, support their pastoral leadership, and sustain their witness. What is the mission of Orthodoxy to the non-indigenous peoples? Is it possible for Orthodoxy to become incarnated in mainstream American culture as it exists in the cities and towns of Southeast Alaska? Or was the indigenization that Oleksa describes possible only in an earlier time before secularizing modernity was set in place?

A third question relates to the Protestant side of the religious history of Southeast Alaska? Assuming that Oleksa’s account of Sheldon Jackson is generally correct, why did the Protestant missionaries identify themselves so fully with the cultural imperialism of governmental and commercial interests that became dominant after the transfer of sovereignty? Oleksa notes that Jackson wanted to protect Natives from the military, sourdoughs and bootleggers. Yet, he was closely connected with governmental officials in Washington, D.C., and during much of his career operated within a system in which church-related institutions functioned as agents of the federal government. Jackson’s activities embodied governmental policies, which in Alaska as in other parts of the country were antagonistic to the values and cultures of indigenous peoples. Did Jackson also have theological reasons for his antagonism? Or did his approach represent another form of incarnation, this time with the dominant class rather than the subordinated peoples?

I may never return to the Alaska that Michael Oleska describes in this book, but I am grateful that he has introduced me to an important aspect of life in this remote part of the world.