

WESTERN RITE ORTHODOXY: UNIATISM OR RIGHT FOR FREEDOM OF LITURGICAL EXPRESSION?

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Abstract

Are the Western Rite Orthodox churches a peculiar way of expression inside the orthodox church or do they happen to be reversed uniates? Not so many Christians are informed about the existence of these communities. This article will deal with the historical development, the situation of the specific parishes and the critics on this issue. Joseph Julian Overbeck a former catholic and protestant converted to Orthodox Christianity, was the first man, attempting to restore the Western Orthodox Catholic church as it was before the Great Schism. Moreover, influential persons such as saint Tikhon and John Maximovic accepted and encouraged many Western Rite Orthodox schemes, which exist until today. Some of them are united to the canonical orthodox Churches and some others are not. Modern theologians such as Kallistos Ware and Alexander Schmemmann eye the rite critically, while some others recognize the right of liturgical multiculturalism inside the Church.

Keywords: Church, Liturgy, Orthodox, Saint Tikhon, Western Rite.

1. The birth of the Western Rite Orthodoxy

The idea was first born with Joseph Julian Overbeck (1821-1905), a German professor at the University of Bonn, who was a Roman-Catholic priest, belonging to the liberal, non ultramontane trend of Roman-Catholicism. In 1852 he visited Rome, but he was not impressed in particular. A few years later he focused on the works of the Eastern Church Fathers. Frustrated by Roman-Catholicism, he turned to Protestantism and got married. In 1860 he headed to England, where from 1863 to 1867 he taught at Staff College and at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. However, he was troubled by Protestantism and turned to Orthodoxy in 1865. He states that, by the time he began to study Orthodox Christianity,

he acknowledged the Orthodox Church as the "Una Sancta"¹. Since then, his works were mostly focused on Orthodoxy in contrast to the other Christian denominations. The priest Eugenie Ivanovic Popoff, who was in the chapel of the Russian Embassy in London, baptized him.

Popoff has been the link between the German professor and the Russian Church. Through him, Overbeck petitioned to the Holy Synod of St. Petersburg for the reestablishment of not just an Orthodox church in the West, but of the Western Orthodox Catholic Church as existed before the Great Schism (1054)². Thus, he sent a text in 1867 to the synod, in which he was requesting for the ordination of three bishops and for the parallel creation of an Autocephalous church. This petition was written in English, German, Russian, Latin, Greek and French³. The answer was positive.

After that, he composed the first post-schismatical Western Rite Orthodox liturgy (*Missae Orthodoxo-Catholicae Occidentalis*). In fact, it was the Tridentine version of the Roman liturgy, cleansed by the elements, which would question the Orthodox doctrine, such as the Filioque.

Nevertheless, Russia was hesitant to set up Overbeck's plan. This slowdown was, probably, due to the Crimean War (1853-1856). On the other hand, Moscow also seemed that she wanted the approval of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In 1879 the German professor went to Constantinople, where he met the Patriarch Joachim III, who received him as a guest, promising at the same time that he would discuss the issue with the patriarchal synod. In 1882 Overbeck's scheme was approved. However, the Autocephalous Church of Greece complained for this. The influence of England to this reaction must be taken into account, since Greece was then in its first years of independence as a state, receiving a huge loan from the English kingdom. In 1905 the professor died without succeeding in seeing his dream come true.

¹ Joseph Julian Overbeck, *The Western Orthodox Catholic Church*, in "The Orthodox Catholic Review", Vol. III, (January-June, 1871), No. 1-6, p. 45. Apud cf. David F. Abramtsov, *The Western rite and the Eastern Church Dr. J. J. Overbeck and his scheme for the re-establishment of the Orthodox Church in the west*, (Master Thesis) A.B., University of Pittsburgh, 1959, p. 4.

² David F. Abramtsov, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

Despite the obstacles encountered by the project of Western Orthodoxy both Orthodox and by Anglicans, efforts continued. About the same period (1897-1907), Metropolitan Tikhon Belavin, later Patriarch of Moscow, as Russian archbishop of North America posed to the Russian synod the following question:

Is it possible for some former Episcopalian Christians, who converted to Orthodoxy, to celebrate their liturgies by using the Book of Common Prayer?⁴

Tikhon had very good relations with the Episcopalians of America and, especially, with the Bishop, Charles Chapman Grafton, who was inclined to a possible union with the Orthodox Church, unlike to other Episcopalians, who would recur to Rome⁵. The Russian synod responded positively under the premise that an entire parish adhered to the ritual and corrections would have been made in the aforementioned book. In 1904 special committee was summoned to examine the specific Anglican liturgies. As a result, a revised version of the Book of Common Prayer was published in 1906. It was completed in 1917 entitled, *Russian Observations on the American Prayer Book* with a second English version of 1927⁶.

The new liturgy, which was named after the Russian Patriarch was used half a century ago by half of the parishes of the so-called "Western Rite Vicariate", which is under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Antioch⁷. The Vicariate of North America was founded in 1958 by Metropolitan Anthony Bashir and with the approval of the Patriarch of Antioch, Alexander the Third (Tahan) and the synod.

One of the first Orthodox Christian communities, which used the Western Rite is not to be found, however, in the USA. In 1936 was the Orthodox Catholic Church of France (ECOF). The priest Eugraph Kovalevsky along with the deacon and brother Maxime revised the liturgy of St. Germain, also known as the Gallican rite, which was approved by Saint John, Archbishop Shanghai and San

⁴ Benjamin Joseph Andersen, *An Anglican liturgy in the Orthodox Church: the origins and development of the antiochian orthodox liturgy of Saint Tikhon*, (Master Thesis), St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, Crestwood, N.Y., 2005, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 7-8.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 3; 12.

Francisco, and it has been used since 1946 to date. Kovalevsky was finally ordained a bishop receiving the name of Jean-Nectaire⁸.

2. Western Rite Orthodox Churches today

Nowadays one can distinguish the canonical Western Rite Churches, that is to say, those who are in full communion with the mainstream orthodox churches and the non-canonical.

These are the canonical parishes of the Antiochian Western Rite Vicariate (AWRV) and the Russian Western Rite Vicariate (RWRV)⁹. They belong, as mentioned earlier, to the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Antioch and, in particular, to the jurisdiction of North America and they use the Saint Tikhon Mass for their worship. The Russian Western Rite Vicariate is under the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia (ROCOR), which is a semi-autonomous church, in which a revised orthodox version of Saint. Gregory's Mass also known as Roman Mass is used¹⁰. Although the majority of them are located in the USA, some communities and, even, Benedictine monasteries, are located in Great Britain and in Germany.

The so-called church of the Western Orthodox Churches (Communion of the Western Orthodox Churches or Communion des Eglises Orthodoxes Occidentales) consists of three groups: the Église Orthodoxe des Gaules, the Église Orthodoxe Française and the Celtic (Église Orthodoxe Celtique). These are the followers of Kovalevsky, of whom about half a century were under the patriarchate of Romania, until 1993¹¹.

In addition, the Western Orthodox Christian Church is an autocephalous church in the USA, having some parishes in Mexico. This Church is a continuation of an Old Catholic group, which was united in 1911 with the Patriarch of Antioch, having achieved a

⁸ Allyn L. Smith, *Review essay on the Saint Andrew's Service Book*, in "St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly", Vol. 41 (1997), No. 2-3, p. 251-252.

⁹ Benjamin Joseph Andersen, *A Short History of the Western Rite Vicariate*, in http://ww1.antiochian.org/sites/default/files/wrv_history.pdf, (retrieved on 08/06/2019).

¹⁰ See for instance: Father Benedict Simpson, *What is the Western Rite?*, in: <https://www.rocor-wr.org/what-is-the-western-rite/>, (retrieved on 07/11/2017).

¹¹ There is also the common agreement for their union in: <http://www.eoc-coc.org/accueil/communion-des-eglises-orthodoxes-occidentales/>, (retrieved on 08/11/2017).

complete doctrinal agreement with the Orthodox faith, but for unknown reasons, they broke away from their mother church. Less important, finally, is the "Synod of Milan", which, in fact, is an Old-Calendar church.

3. Reflection on the issue

Despite the shortage of literature on the topic, both good and negative views have been expressed. There have been criticisms too, concerning the order of the Western Mass, but the main concern, was focusing on the necessity of such type of Orthodoxy.

Father Alexander Schmemmann, one of the most well-known theologians, and an expert on the orthodox liturgy, is very critical of the case, claiming that, at first, they do not express the Orthodox ethos. The liturgy, on the contrary, of St. John Chrysostom and Basil is not just "Eastern", but also closer to the spirituality of the western pre-schismatical liturgies compared to the post-schismatical ones. Schmemmann vocalizes in this way his pastoral concern that the orthodox proselytes may not obtain the orthodox experience. In a few words his argumentation can be presented as follows: "What is the reason for the catechumens in the West to use the Western Rite, which is of undoubted origin, rather than the Eastern one, which definitely expresses orthodoxy?"¹²

Similar pastoral concerns are expressed by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware in "The Priest". Firstly, the bishop recognizes the right for multiculturalism to the liturgical life of the church, but then he highlights the danger of a possible division within Orthodoxy. The eastern typikon serves as an international language in the orthodox world. In addition, the western communities are in danger of being excluded from the eastern, ending up as a ghetto. Therefore, he considers that this issue must be discussed on a Pan-Orthodox level¹³.

¹² Alexander Schmemmann, *Orthodoxy and the Western Rite The Question of Necessity*, in "St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly", Vol. 2 (1958), No. 4, p. 37-38. Apud cf. Jack Turner, *Orthodoxy and the Western Rite: The Question of necessity*, in "The Canadian Journal of Orthodox Christianity", Volume V (2010), No. 3, p. 114.

¹³ Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, *Some thoughts on the "Western Rite" in Orthodoxy*, in "The Priest. A Newsletter for the Clergy of the Diocese of San Francisco", Issue No. 5 (May 1996), p. 1.

Concerning the form and the order of the western rites, honest observations have been made, which should be taken into account. First of all, the three liturgies of Saint Tikhon, Saint Germain and Saint Gregory do not depict a direct follow-up of the ancient West before the Great Schism, or an amalgam of a long-standing ecclesiastical experience. On the contrary, they were an “office work”, as many experts claim. Indeed, the Saint Tikhon liturgy includes prayers taken from the “Book of Common Prayer”, such as the epiclesis of the liturgy St. John Chrysostom.

Two problematic practices, for instance, are underlined by Jack Turner: the elevation of the Holy Gifts to the believers and their worship, which is included in the books of the Western Orthodox Rites. The first, according to the author, is related to the Roman-Catholic teaching of the transubstantiation. Lastly, the moment of the consecration of the gifts differs from the eastern liturgical practice, which does not apply to the orthodox experience¹⁴.

The Western Rite parishes of the ROCOR use six different versions of the liturgies of St. Gregory, which this alone complicates the situation. Of course, in 2011, the Conference of Western Rite Orthodox Vicariates discussed the differences between the rituals. Thus, it seems that the Christians of those communities are willing to revise and correct the Western Masses¹⁵.

However, next to the liturgical problems appeared canonical problems. Some practices of the Western Orthodox Christians oppose to certain canons of the Quinisext Ecumenical council. In particular, the 55th forbids fasting on Saturdays and Sundays, while the 56th rule to eat cheese and fish during the great lent. According to Jack Turner, these canons are not followed by the above-mentioned communities¹⁶.

Nevertheless, the supporters of the Western Rite scheme expound their own arguments. They argue that the Roman Mass should not be called tridentine, because it was not revised at the synod of Trent (1545-1536). This reforming, liturgical process of

¹⁴ Jack Turner, *O salutaris hostia: The Challenge of Eucharistic Adoration in Western Rite Orthodoxy*, in “Religious Studies and Theology”, Vol. 31 (2012), No. 1, p. 44-46.

¹⁵ Jack Turner, *Journeying Onwards: An Overview of the Liturgical Books in Western-Rite Orthodoxy*, in “St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” Vol. 56 (2012), No. 1, p. 94; 106.

¹⁶ Jack Turner, *Western-Rite Orthodoxy as a Canonical Problem*, in “Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies”, Vol. 51 (2010), No. 3-4, p. 241.

the synod involved the banning of other ceremonies that had a history of over two hundred years. Thus, the Ambrosian, the Mozambican and, of course, the Roman Mass remained unaltered. The only liturgical revision, made by the Western Rite parishes, was the removal of the western post-schismatical saints. In 1960 Pope Paul II in the second Vatican Synod replaced the old Roman mass with the *Novus Ordo Missae*¹⁷.

Furthermore, the liturgy of Saint Tikhon contains hymns such as the "Gloria in Excelsis", who are ancient. Many modern-day Saints have also acknowledged the use of such western rites, such as, those of Tikhon, John Maximovic, Nicholas of Japan together with the figures of metropolitan Anthony Bloom and Vladimir Lossky. Last but not least, if the Western Orthodox Rite is accused for introducing foreign western elements to the Orthodox Church, the Easter Rite should be, also, criticized for incorporating non-Christian practices during the Ottoman occupation¹⁸.

Conclusions

Whether one is supposed to be in favor or against it, the Western Orthodox Rite is a very interesting case, one that demands deep study. Difficulties are obviously encountered, which have been mentioned above. Certainly, the subject could be discussed within the frame of a Pan-Orthodox conference.

The posed question of this article may have been answered. However, new concerns are born through the study. Some of these have already been presented; some others not. How would the Orthodox Church react, if, for example, bigger ecclesiastical groups, such as the Anglicans or the Roman Catholics, accepted the orthodox teaching? Would she demand from them to abide by the Eastern liturgical tradition? Should those parishes gain in the future their independence? How? Could this solve the jurisdictional problem of the orthodox Diaspora?

¹⁷ John Charles Conley, *Lux Occidentalis: The Orthodox Western Rite and the Liturgical Tradition of Western Orthodox Christianity with Reference to the Orthodox Missal*, Saint's Luke's Priory Press, Stanton, N.J., 1995, p. 4-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6-11. Apud cf. Alexander Schmemmann, *Orthodoxy and the Western Rite The Question of Necessity*, in "St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly", Vol. 2 (1958), No. 4, p. 37-38.