

Joshua N.

Lived Religion in Eastern Europe

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28 October 2015

Essay 2- Worship Service

On October 25th I attended the 9:30 worship service at the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Willimantic. I was graciously accepted into the congregation's church and was allowed to participate in their weekly session of worship. While attending the Sunday morning service I tried to utilize my small window of time in an Orthodox environment to understand a little more about their practices in their place of worship. In order to understand the nature of this congregation's practices I examined their actions during the service, the atmosphere set in the church and liturgy used for the service. By observing the broad scope of the religious practices and features that added to the spiritual environment set up in the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church I received a better understanding of the culture and values that surround the Eastern Orthodox Church. The entire experience helped give me a better understanding of the universal practices of the Orthodox faith and how its practice in the United States can still relate to its origins in Eastern Europe.

Perhaps one of the most differential pieces of this Orthodox Church would be the particular setting that is constructed inside of the church walls in order to make an optimal worshipping environment for the congregation. When I arrived at the location of the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church the first thing I noticed was the iconic onion shaped gold dome that many Orthodox churches sponsor. The connections between American Orthodox churches and European Orthodox churches spanned much farther than simply

having similarities in their roofs though. After entering the church I recognized many traditional features to the sanctuary where the service was held. There were images of biblical figures, angels and saints on all of the images but to my surprise the icons came far short of ending there. There were also dozens more icons scattered along the walls of the church and several tables and altars set up along the sides and front of the sanctuary where candles and icons lay for people to pay their respect. The room was so heavily congested with icons that it felt almost like a museum paying tribute to them all. Even the back wall of the church was covered in a large icon-styled portrait of Jesus resting in a fold of Mary's clothes. It seemed that the church was almost designed for iconic worship, and the congregation acted accordingly. Throughout the service many people left their seats in order to get up and individually worship each icon which was present. At each altar or iconic portrait the worshipper stopped mouthed a quick prayer and gestured a crucifix across their chest in order to pay proper respect to each of the images. The strikingly different behavior that I noticed between this and most of services, aside from the mere inclusion of icons, was the self-guided aspect to addressing the icons. Each member of the church paid respects to the icons on their own or with their own families and each individual did so at any given point during the service which gave the service a individually-directed feeling.

Another important feature in the sanctuary was the incorporation of smell. When I first entered the church's main room of worship all I could smell was the musty smell that an older building such as this one usually is filled with. This smell was not very surprising to me since it smelt vaguely similar to the musty smell that my own church has, but such a smell did not last long. By the time the altar boys and priest began

preparing the room for the service many smells lofted around the space of worship. The altar boys lit candles both near the icons in the front of the room where the congregation sat and also lit candles at the far end of the room where the priest worked for the majority of the service. These candles resonated a sweet smell across the room immediately but the real scent that became prominent in the room was the incense which the priest traditionally spread round through brass censer suspended by a chain. The priest brought the incense around the entire room one time as the service began but brought it out several times afterwards to let the device plume near the sides of the altar which he worked at. The interesting interaction that the congregation had with the scent was very similar to how a worshipper would act in Europe. As the priest brought the incense around the room the first time several of the older women in the room tried to loft the smoke in their direction. This action seemed very normal to the women who were participating in it and it seemed as if the sensory experience from the incense was a significant piece of their worshipping experience that morning.

Icons acted as an important form of visual worship for the congregation and incense offered an important sense of smell to the atmosphere required for worship in the Orthodox faith but both of these features of the service seemed overwhelmed by the importance of audible worship during the service. All services are conducted through verbal communication but what made this Orthodox service particularly different for me was the reliance on chants and song for almost all of the communication during the services. The entire service lasted nearly two hours but there was surprisingly very little talking done by the congregation or priest during the service, instead almost every piece of the service was presented through simple chants. I recognized many of the prayers and

passages used in the service through my time spent at Lutheran services but these passages were presented in an entirely different way because of their chanted presentation. These chants and songs added to the serene atmosphere that was already being built by the bright colors of the icons and the powerful scents of the incense being burnt. The repetitive chanting was not complex in form so it was able to add a basic musical presentation to the passages being read. This common chant performed by the congregation and priest created a sense of community from my observation, and also gave the congregation more reason to pay attention to the repeated messages in the chants. These chants were solemn sounding but still also added a very evocative spiritual aspect to the service through its unified chant.

While the atmosphere established in the church through the use of icons, incense and chants was a very important process in the service I still felt obligated to understand more about the religious beliefs being sponsored there in order to understand the entire faith better. The liturgy that was being used for the service revealed several values of the Eastern Orthodox religion through some of the messages there were being constantly repeated. "Wisdom!" was one of the most common proclamations in the service and usually referred to the Word of God and the advice it gave its followers as "wise." This seemed unique to my experience of the Christian faith through Lutheranism since Lutherans typically referred to the Word of God as "right" or "holy" which implies that God's orders should innately be followed, while considering God's word as "wise" implies that it should be followed for the sake of the worshipper's best interest. This seemed to connect with an overarching theme throughout the entire service which was that a follower of God reaps what he/she sows. The messages of the service made it very

clear that one must act in God's faith, not simply believe in it, in order to receive its benefits and not feel the wrath of God. Fear of doing wrong in the eyes of God was a prevalent message in the service and was even apparent on the archway over the communion altar which said in large letters, "In fear and those of good faith draw near" which makes it very clear that a strong relationship with God for an Orthodox believer is equal parts fear and love. I found this fear-tactic style of preaching apparent in the priest's main sermon to the congregation where he repeatedly emphasized the importance of reaching out to the community and performing charitable acts in the name of God. He specifically said that the members of the congregation are rich both in worldly possessions and in their faith, even though they lived in the Windham area that is typically considered impoverished. This strong reliance on acts of faith differed from Protestant religions which claim that faith and faith alone can save someone. This seemed to be just one of the different values that this faith presented from the rest of the Christian faith.

My experience at the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Willimantic is one which helped give me a broader understanding of the Orthodox religion. Despite many of the similarities which this service held with ones I've experienced at my own church there were several large differences in the presentation of the services and the values being presented. The church service offered both a highly sensory, spiritual atmosphere and a specific set of moral codes which the congregation seemed to wholeheartedly believe. The manner which this congregation celebrated their religion during the service showed many similarities with common practices of the Eastern Orthodox followers in Europe and created an authentic Orthodox experience because of this. Ultimately my experience

at this church helped me to receive a better cultural understanding of the lived religious practices which the Eastern Orthodox faith is comprised of.