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Becoming Culturally Savvy Orthodox Christians

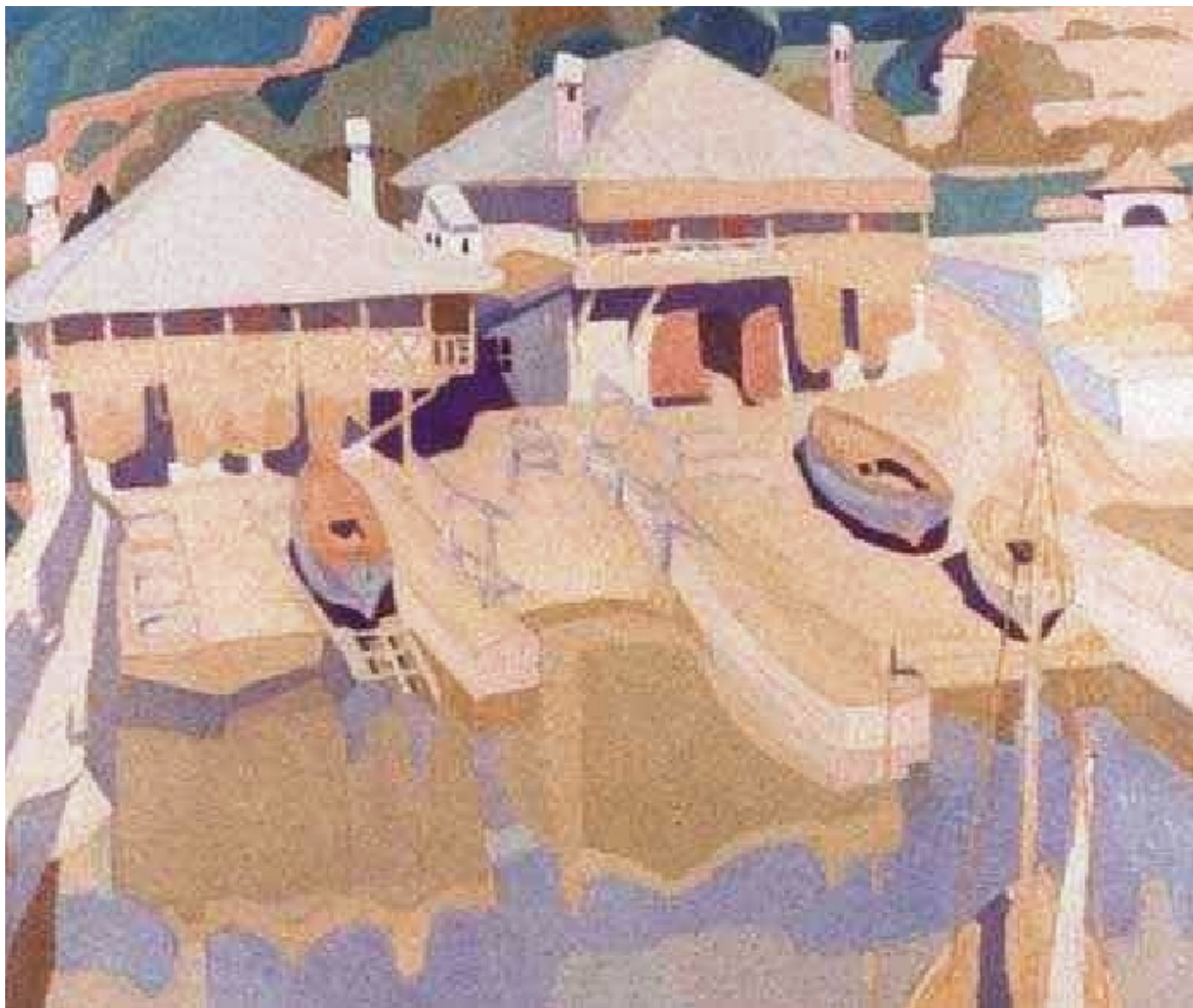
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In my 24 years as an Orthodox Christian, I've heard countless homilies about the evils of the culture in which we live. Most of those homilies have gone on to exhort the hearers to live sanctified lives in the midst of the culture, but very few have found anything to say about how we might go about redeeming the culture itself.

By this point, I'm ready to paraphrase Mark Twain's famous comment about the weather: "Everybody complains about the culture, but nobody does anything about it!"



A recent book examines this phenomenon from a general Christian perspective. The book is called *The Culturally Savvy Christian*, by Dick Staub, and it's one of the most refreshing books I've read in a long time.

Staub's thesis is that in order to have a positive impact on the popular culture, Christians must be serious about their faith, savvy about the culture, and skilled in relating the two. In analyzing where we've gone wrong in contemporary America, Staub identifies three ineffective responses to the culture that Christians have fallen into: cocooning from it, combating it, and conforming to it. In broad terms, he contends, cocooning has been the response of fundamentalists; combating, that of the politicized "religious right"; and conforming, that of evangelicalism, which has degenerated over the last fifty years into "Christianity Lite." None of these responses leads to the redemption of popular culture; rather, their combined effect has been to alienate the culture from Christianity and to water down the faith to the point that Christians no longer have anything distinctive to offer.

Staub's analysis of the evolution of each of these trends is penetrating and enlightening. But he doesn't stop with identifying the problem; he actually has a solution to propose. That is that American Christians must, first, reground ourselves in a deep, traditional faith capable of transforming us as human beings; second, understand the culture we live in rather than condemning it from the outside; and third, live within the culture in a way that communicates God's transformative power to those around us, both through our lives and through the culture we ourselves create.

The Problem: Cocooning, Combating, Conforming

In reading this book with an Orthodox eye, I was gratified to note that the author is not only aware of the existence of Orthodoxy but appears to be in fundamental sympathy with it. He quotes several Orthodox authors, and the "serious Christianity" to which he calls his readers is consistent with Orthodoxy, though he does not identify it as such. This serious Christianity is a deeply grounded faith that understands the profound love of God for human beings and in which the believer surrenders himself to the transforming power of that love.

Orthodoxy understands the love of God better than any other Christian confession, and we even have a name for the process of being transformed into God's image—theosis. So if we as Orthodox wish to follow Staub's plan for transforming the culture, we already have a leg up, as it were, in that we have committed ourselves to a faith that is capable of taking on that task. (Of course, we have to live out that faith and truly experience theosis in our lives.)

However, I have to say that for the most part, that appears to me to be where our advantage ends. Although Staub ascribes his three ineffective responses to the

culture primarily to various groups of Protestants, I recognized in each of these responses trends I have seen in contemporary Orthodoxy as well.

The first ineffective response I have personally experienced and found wanting: cocooning. If we perceive the culture as evil and do not wish to be polluted by this evil, the obvious course is to withdraw. We isolate ourselves within an Orthodox community, keep our children out of public schools, avoid television, movies, fiction, and worldly music and art. (I'm not saying these actions are wrong—only that they can be taken to excess.) If we have artistic talents, we use them only in direct service of the Church: we compose or sing liturgical music, paint icons, write apologetics or books about how to create your own Orthodox cocoon.

With this approach, we might preserve ourselves from evil, but we won't save our neighbor by shutting him out of our lives. And if we're not saving our neighbor, ultimately, we're not saving ourselves. Cocooning also has a sneaky tendency to lead to self-righteousness, legalism, and pride. And in avoiding all the artistic products of Western culture, we cut ourselves off from a great deal that is good and true, and deprive ourselves and our children of a rich source of spiritual formation. One Athonite elder recommends novices to read, not *The Arena* or *Unseen Warfare*, but *David Copperfield*.

A less common but still present response among Orthodox is to combat the culture in the form of political activism. The danger here is that it is so very difficult in practice to “hate the sin but love the sinner.” If we crusade against abortion or gay marriage or the secularization of the schools, it's terribly easy to fall into the trap of condemning the people who practice the behaviors we deplore. And it's even easier for those people to perceive our attitude as condemnatory even when it isn't.

Conforming to the culture is a trap that many Orthodox fall into as well. Sometimes it's deliberate: immigrants can sometimes be so eager to become “real Americans” that they buy into the culture wholesale, only to discover years later that they have abandoned the true spiritual values of their native culture in favor of one that is spiritually bankrupt. Tragically, the second generation is often lost in the process.

For others, conforming to the culture is something that happens insidiously, without their even being aware of it, because they are surrounded by the culture and their faith community does not offer them a viable alternative. Or perhaps the alternative is there, but it seems too difficult to pursue it; it's so much easier just to go along with the crowd.

The Solution: Countering, Communicating, Creating

What then is the alternative—the effective response Staub advocates? He suggests a threefold approach: countering culture as aliens, communicating in culture as ambassadors, and creating culture as artists. (Yes, this book is big on alliteration.)

The concept of countering culture as aliens might seem at first glance to be another take on cocooning or combating. In “countering” culture, Christians do create their own strong community with a kind of culture of its own. The difference is that they do not isolate themselves within their community. They partake, selectively and with discernment, of the culture around them and make their own contributions to that culture, without compromising their values and beliefs. They create a way of life that is attractive to the world by virtue of their integrity, authenticity, and love for one another. This is the kind of community the early Christians had, and some Orthodox parishes have succeeded in recreating that kind of community today.

This leads into the second point, communicating in culture as ambassadors. To do this we must care deeply about the people we are reaching out to, be aware of the culture that has formed them, and build bridges between that culture and the faith we are offering. The great Orthodox evangelists are all examples of this approach. Ss. Cyril and Methodius, St. Innocent of Alaska, and St. Nicholas of Japan, among others, all took the time and trouble to become thoroughly familiar with the cultures to which they were sent and to translate the Gospel, not only into the language of the people, but into their culture as well. They identified what was good in the existing culture and integrated it into their presentation of Christianity, while gently downplaying the culture’s less edifying elements.

In an interview recorded in *Gifts of the Desert* by Kyriakos Markides, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware expresses his concern that Western Orthodox are too reluctant to engage with the culture we live in:

Christ is the lord of history. We must look, then, for signs of the Truth, traces and footprints of the Truth, throughout our modern culture. . . . We Orthodox, particularly those of us who are Western converts, are often in danger of becoming church mice. We just live inside the church and nibble at the crumbs in the church, but we don’t look outside at the presence of Christ in the world as well. We Orthodox who live in the West are heirs to the entire cultural and intellectual tradition of the West, much of which indeed is profoundly Christian. We are heirs to Dante, to Shakespeare, to Milton, to Wordsworth. Of course we have our own

Orthodox interpretation of their work. But if we are to play our role as Orthodox in the Western world we must be willing to listen and to learn from the spiritual masters of the Western tradition. . . . [Some] of us must surely engage in a dialogue with Western culture. Otherwise we are betraying our roles as Orthodox placed here in the West as mediators and witnesses.

Finally, Staub exhorts us to create culture as artists. Creativity is one of the fundamental ways in which we are made in the image of God, and art of all kinds is among the most powerful means of awakening and nourishing the human spirit. Our mindless, soulless popular culture needs great art more than ever before.

Obviously, not everyone is an artist, even in the broader sense that includes music, literature, and so forth as well as visual art. But those who do possess such talents have a God-given responsibility to use them to His glory by contributing to the culture in which we live. Certainly, using our gifts in direct service of the Church is a fine thing, but not every painter needs to paint icons, and not every musician needs to limit him or herself to liturgical music. When we create art that is of the highest quality and put our whole souls into that art, it will glorify God regardless of whether or not its content is specifically “Christian.” Conversely, when Christians settle for less than the highest excellence in the art they produce—or in the art they consume—they betray the image of God in themselves and lead the world farther from its Creator.

Staub’s example of the ultimate culturally savvy Christian artist is C. S. Lewis. Lewis had a deep, traditional, transformative faith, which he shared with the world through his writings out of love for his readers. His knowledge of Western culture was encyclopedic, and he used this knowledge to deepen his faith and enrich his work. He adhered to the highest standards of excellence in his writing, thereby creating in his fiction worlds that are deeply attractive to spiritual seekers of all kinds. (I can testify to this personally: it was reading first the *Chronicles of Narnia*, then the *Space Trilogy*, that awoke a longing for God in me, as an agnostic intellectual college student hostile to Christianity; and it was reading *Mere Christianity* that convinced me it was not necessary to sacrifice intellect for faith.)

For anyone concerned with the question of how best to live as Orthodox Christians today—how to be in this crazy world but not of it—reading *The Culturally Savvy Christian* is a great place to start. And for those who also have a creative gift, I would say the book is a must. It will educate, direct, and inspire you to make the most of your creativity to the glory of God.

Let's stop complaining about the culture—and start doing something about it!

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