

Liturgy as Catechesis: A Rhetorical Perspective on Orthodox Christian Educational Practice

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Abstract

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Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983) spent his life trying to persuade Orthodox clergy that the liturgy provides not only the context for Christian learning, but also much of its content. Schmemmann’s characterization of the liturgy’s contribution to the education and ultimate transformation of Orthodox Christians resonates with a number of contemporary rhetorical themes regarding personal and collective identities in a postmodern Western world. From the perspective of rhetoric, the need for liturgical revival that Schmemmann identified emerges in part because of the dialogic tension between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions: the tension between the Gutenberg galaxy and the electronic global village that Marshall McLuhan first spoke of, between literacy and the new orality that Walter Ong examined. Once people can find themselves more integrated with culture in their interaction with media and less isolated by their literate cultural assumptions, they can present themselves at the Orthodox liturgy ready and able to be spiritually transformed into disciples of the faith according to the catechetical teachings they encounter. As a new orality emerges in Western cultures, the Orthodox liturgy serves people who more and more will come to church ready for the liturgy to serve as catechesis as it did in ancient times when the Church and the host culture were more strongly interwoven.



Introduction

Every year, Orthodox priests witness new and improved educational materials published to help with the catechetical instruction that prepares the faithful for baptism and other sacraments. Frequently these new materials seem to presume that catechetical instruction occurs in a context outside and apart from liturgical worship. The materials do not acknowledge that worship services themselves serve as important “classes” in religious education. If church-sponsored educational materials overlook the importance of actively engaging in the liturgy as a means for disciple-making and faith-formation, it is easy to conclude that congregations do too. But as Aidan Kavanaugh wrote, “It cannot be forgotten that the Church at worship is not only present to God; far more significantly, the living God is present to the Church.”¹

This paper calls attention to liturgical worship as a central means of education and transformation of both individuals and entire communities. We base our appeal on some of the writings of the late Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983) and on the high regard awarded rhetoric, or persuasion, in the scholarly tradition upon which contemporary Orthodox churches are built.

In Orthodox churches, liturgical worship is designed to bring participants into the presence of the crucified and risen Christ. The scripture readings, prayers, hymns, blessings, and symbols of the liturgical services function as vital resources upon which both clergy and laity can draw to educate their congregations in the essentials of the faith. Through their liturgical encounters, congregations learn about their common faith, are shaped and formed into Christ’s body – the Church – and are called to transform the world through love of neighbour. All of the members of the congregation, both those who partake of Holy Communion and those who witness it, return to the outside world as missionaries of the good news of God’s kingdom. Every week the entire process begins again;

¹ Aidan Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology (Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981)* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 8.

the congregation participates in liturgical worship to affirm and reaffirm each individual's faith in God and then disperses to enact it.

Schmemmann's characterization of the liturgy, as part of the education and transformation of Orthodox Christians, resonates with a number of rhetorical themes regarding personal and collective identities in a post-modern Western world. From the perspective of rhetoric, the need for liturgical revival that Schmemmann identified emerges in part because of the dialogic tension between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions, between the Eastern Greek-oriented Orthodox tradition with its treasure-trove of "oral residue,"² and Western Latin-oriented tradition that has privileged the written word. This tension between competing systems of pieties, systems that provide the framework for a "sense of what properly goes with what,"³ funds the contemporary argument among Orthodox clergy as to whether or not participation in the liturgy provides catechetical education; the alternative is dedicated catechism classes which may marginalize liturgical experience. Schmemmann worked to mitigate the tension between the perceived compartments of living faith and learning about it, of orality and literacy, with a view to celebrating "the organic connection between the liturgical life of the Church and her educational effort."⁴ Schmemmann sought to revive the liturgy and its role in the daily lives of the faithful.

The way that different educational traditions in the East and West embrace or reject rhetorical tenets may be one key to understanding how the liturgy may be at the same time appreciated and dismissed as a rhetorical strategy for catechesis, even within the same religious tradition. Further, contemporary rhetoric provides a useful lens by which to examine Schmemmann's project. Contemporary rhetoric identifies aspects of a

² Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 38.

³ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 74.

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life: Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience* (Syosset, NY: Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church of America, 1974), 5.

return to a new orality, a convergence of the Gutenberg galaxy and the electronic global village,⁵ a levelling of the relative value of reading and speech.⁶ People who find themselves a part of that convergence live their daily lives integrating different aspects of their world: real and virtual, private and public, leisure and work, mediated and unmediated. These people enjoy an advantage in their ability to participate fully in the liturgy compared to their print-oriented neighbours whose inward-oriented reading practices isolate them from others in the communities at home, at work, and at worship. As the new orality takes hold in Western cultures, more and more will come to church ready for the liturgy to serve as catechesis as it did in ancient times when the Church and the host culture were more strongly interwoven.

Significantly, evidence of the Orthodox liturgy's successful integration of orality and literacy emerges in some of the most important rhetorical thought of the twentieth century; for example, Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva propose concepts that assume the convergence of orality and literacy, concepts undergirded by the framework of pieties constructed by the Orthodox Church. Rhetorical theorists, whose work has privileged the Western Church for the past millennium, should recognize that the Eastern Church provides an equally valuable recourse for rhetorical theory; further, with its acknowledgement and celebration of the visual, the Eastern Church may provide insights into the new orality that concepts rooted in Western Christian thought are less well equipped to address.

Schmemmann on Worship as Education and Transformation

As an Orthodox priest, pastor, professor, seminary dean, theologian, and author, Alexander Schmemmann worked to reconcile the tension between the traditions of Eastern Christianity and the assumptions of an audience educated in the Western context. Until his death in 1983, his professional life

⁵ See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962) and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

⁶ See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

was devoted to the Orthodox liturgical renewal and revival, especially within the Orthodox Church in America.⁷ Perhaps Schmemmann's most important contribution to the Orthodox Church is his focus on the centrality of worship in the life and practice of the Church. His writings reflect his passion for liturgical worship, not only as a subject for study and reflection, but also as the formative factor for theological inquiry; according to Schmemmann, the scriptures, doctrine, faith, practices, and prayers of the Church are expressed and fully realized in liturgy, specifically in the Eucharist. One can see his life-long interest in the Eucharist throughout his writings, especially in his memoirs, his sermons for Radio Liberty, and his *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*.⁸ Schmemmann contributed to the education of the Church by writing introductions to prayer books and booklets for feast days, as well as numerous articles for Orthodox newspapers, and through many public presentations, talks, and retreats throughout the United States and Canada.⁹

Central to Schmemmann's liturgical vision of religious education was the eucharistic liturgy.¹⁰ The Eucharist was the primary perspective through which Schmemmann envisioned a parish's educational work and, indeed, the conduit for spiritual formation. According to Schmemmann, through the prayers, blessings, and hymns of the liturgical celebration, the Church reveals its true nature as the Kingdom's antechamber. In his essay "Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform," he emphasizes that the nature of liturgical theology resides in its experience rather than its existence:

⁷ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997); *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997); *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973–1983*, trans. Julia Schmemmann (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

⁸ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

⁹ Paul Garrett, "Fr. Alexander Schmemmann: A Chronological Bibliography," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 28 (1974): 11–26.

¹⁰ *The Divine Liturgy According to St. John Chrysostom*.

the question addressed by liturgical theology to liturgy and to the entire liturgical Tradition is not about liturgy but about “theology,” i.e., about the faith of the Church as expressed, communicated and preserved by the liturgy. Here liturgy is viewed as the *locus theologicus par excellence* because it is its very function, its *leitourgia* in the original meaning of that word, to manifest and to fulfill the Church’s faith and to manifest it not partially, not “discursively,” but as a living totality and catholic experience.¹¹

Schmemmann emphasizes liturgy as the ontological precondition for theology, or what Kavanaugh has called “*theologia prima*.”¹² When the Church gathers for worship it enters into an encounter with the one true living God who reveals His holy will to the community of faith through the public reading of scripture, affirmed through the common prayers and in the breaking of bread. Thus, the community of faith is engaged in true living theology that is both redemptive and salvific.

Examining this intimate connection between liturgical worship and life, Schmemmann states:

It is my conviction that the Orthodox faith has its most adequate expression in worship and that truly Christian life is the fulfillment of the grace, vision, teaching, inspiration and power that we receive in worship. Therefore it is in the organic connection between the liturgical life of the Church and her educational effort that we find the uniquely Orthodox principle of religious education.¹³

Schmemmann seemed to emphasize liturgical worship over everything else, including service to the needy and negotiating one’s spiritual journey within the larger context of the worshipping community. Nevertheless, Schmemmann’s theological corpus does reveal an intimate connection between liturgy and

¹¹ Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life*, 5.

¹² Kavanaugh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 74.

¹³ Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life*, 5.

life. According to Schmemmann, liturgy is meant to be missionary, given that liturgy always proclaims the gospel to the world around us. As mission, the liturgy is called to transform both the worshipping community and the culture and society in which members of the worshipping community live. This missionary and transformative nature of the eucharistic liturgy was the topic for reflection in Schmemmann's journal in early 1973:

The Eucharist reveals the Church as community – love for Christ, love in Christ – as a mission to turn each and all to Christ. The Church has no other purpose, no “religious life” separate from the world. Otherwise the Church would become an idol. The Church is the home each of us leaves to go to work and to which one returns with joy in order to find life, happiness and joy, to which everyone brings back the fruits of his labor and where everything is transformed into a feast, into freedom and fulfillment, the presence, the experience of this “home” – already out of time, unchanging, filled with eternity, revealing eternity. Only this presence can give meaning and value to everything in life, can refer everything to that experience and make it full. “The image of this world is passing away.” But only by passing away does the world finally become the “World”: a gift of God, a happiness that comes from being in communion with the content, the form, the image of that “World.”¹⁴

Thus, Schmemmann dismisses any notion of separation between the everyday world and the Church. The liturgy becomes a mission to the world as the faithful are called to bring the love, joy, peace, and blessedness of the Kingdom to the world, as the risen Lord commanded His disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”¹⁵ Following

¹⁴ Schmemmann, *The Journals*, 23.

¹⁵ Matthew 28: 19–20.

the Lord's injunction to continue His teaching ministry, the Church of God is called to continue this proclamation of the good news of salvation to whoever has ears to hear.

Ultimately, the eucharistic liturgy transforms the reality of daily existence, as the Orthodox theologian Michael Plekon notes:

the whole of the day, the night, the year, all of time is sanctified in the liturgy. All of human activity is to be transformed: work, play, eating, sleeping. Every point in human life is a moment of God's saving and bringing us back: from our burial and resurrection in Baptism, to Chrismation, or confirmation, to Christian marriage, the anointing of the sick, and the burial of the Christian. Through the Church's liturgy and ordained ministry all of human life, especially material things – bread, wine, oil, water, words, touch – are directed back to what they were created to be – good in God's sight and, in the case of humankind, his very image and likeness. The consequence of this life of God and with God in liturgy is made explicit. Time becomes the very 'sacrament of the world to come,' the eschatological icon of God's saving and reclaiming of his fallen creation.¹⁶

In many ways the real liturgy begins when the members of the worshipping community leave on Sunday morning to go back into the world and share their lives with their family, friends, neighbours, and co-workers. The liturgy challenges them to become missionaries of the good news to the entire world. In other words, they are called to incarnate the love, peace, and joy of the Kingdom in their daily relationships with friends and family. Thus, when they are educated, formed, and transformed into disciples of Christ, they are called to share this faith with the entire cosmos.

¹⁶ Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 190.

Rhetorical Roots of Christian Traditions

Scholars recognize the complexity of the circumstances surrounding Christianity's beginnings in the margins of Roman imperial society and its subsequent rise to the social center, with all the wealth and power such a position requires and generates. Contributing to the complexity of the social context of the emergence of Christianity is the difficulty in attributing motives and describing practices of a singular entity called "the Christian Church." For one thing, the earliest Christians worshipped in ways that were hardly identical. Identical rituals, of course, would be impossible without a printed text. For another thing, even before Christianity emerged from the margins of Roman society, it suffered growing pains. Disagreements of theory and practice splintered it again and again, a state of affairs with which we are familiar even today. Nevertheless, Christian churches share a history to a certain point, with many of them even sharing a modicum of practice.

The early effectiveness of Christian teaching/preaching owed much to the classical Greek and Roman study and practice of rhetoric. Western rhetorical history recognizes thinkers such as Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, and Chrysostom, among others, for seeking to reconcile their pagan education with the teachings of Christianity. Bizzell and Herzberg trace early Christian rhetorical thought through the intellectual traditions of the eastern Roman Empire, "a seat of Christian learning throughout the years of turmoil"¹⁷ as Christians fought to legitimate their beliefs. Origen (d. 254 or 255), "the foremost member of the Catechetical School of Alexandria,"¹⁸

used Jewish exegetical methods to legitimate a kind of allegorical reading that extracted moral and spiritual meanings from the Bible. Also, drawing on Greco-Roman rhetorical concepts of persuasion, Origen developed a homiletic style that began with the meaning

¹⁷ Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston: Bedford Press, 1990), 368.

¹⁸ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. II* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), 27.

exegesis had discovered in the text and that employed colloquial, emotional language to move the audience to understand and apply this meaning to their lives.¹⁹

Yet, by only the fourth century, Jerome (d. 420) and Augustine (d. 430) illustrated the oppositional views of one aspect of the tension that would eventually distinguish Western and Eastern approaches. On the one hand, Jerome, “an important Latin Father of the church, condemned classical rhetoric”; on the other hand, Augustine “tried to reconcile it with Christianity,”²⁰ writing that “since ... there has been placed at our disposal the power of eloquence, which is so efficacious in pleading either for the erroneous cause or the right, why is it not zealously acquired by the good, so as to do service for the truth?”²¹

Augustine successfully made his case among many followers. Looking back on this development, Walter Ong observes:

rhetoric furnished the ancient world ... with its educational ideal: the rhetorician or public speaker was the perfectly educated man for pagan Greek and Roman culture, and provided the fundamental humanistic material which Christian education sought to form in Christ. Rhetoric was of immense importance in the Christian liturgy.... The Roman and Greek liturgies made classical rhetoric a tremendously effective vehicle for biblical teaching.²²

¹⁹ Bizzell and Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, 368.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 369.

²¹ St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* IV.111.3, quoted in James Murphy, “The End of the Ancient World: The Second Sophistic and Saint Augustine,” in *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, ed. James Murphy, Richard A. Katula, Forbes I. Hill and Donovan J. Ochs (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2003), 231.

²² Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 212.

Indeed, in the process of arguing against a natural rhetorical nature for liturgy, Alan Kreider admits its persuasive function, albeit in the company of other strategies:

in the early years of Christendom, worship services came to be missionary in intent: Christian leaders hoped that the sheer splendor of the gold and jewels in the buildings, the rhetorical eloquence of the sermons, and the magnificence of the ritual would move the non-baptized to request baptism.²³

In public, Latin and Greek Church Fathers equally professed hostility to the importance of rhetoric, at least more hostility than Augustine encouraged. In practice, however, the Greek Fathers seem to have employed aspects of classical rhetoric more enthusiastically.

Of course, a stable scholarly tradition implies commitment to the value of the written word, which the Greeks had successfully “interiorized”²⁴ as a way to “store knowledge” by Plato’s (d. 347 B.C.) time. Thus, when we learn, as Hugh Wybrew²⁵ details, that the liturgy of the Byzantine Rite changed many times over more than ten centuries into the form that is used today, we understand that such sophisticated mutability indicates the editing of written texts.²⁶

As we can see clearly today, with demographics such as class, sex, and age influencing differing rates of adoption of electronic technology, even though overarching social change may take strong hold among some members of a particular culture, other members lag behind. Further, the vanguard of change never fully rejects the past, but retains useful vestiges of previous cultural behaviours or assumptions.

²³ Alan Kreider, “Beyond Bosch: The Early Church and the Christendom Shift,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29 (2005): 60.

²⁴ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 24.

²⁵ See Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990).

²⁶ See John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1979), 54–65.

It is not a contradiction, then, to consider that Christian preaching took full advantage of the classical oral tradition of rhetoric, as Augustine suggested, while taking equal advantage of the new “technology” of literacy. While this argument rests on understanding that Christianity’s emergence coincides with the gradual transition from oral to literate societies, keep in mind that, the transition of the Fathers as a class, both Eastern and Western, must have been further along than that of their audiences. Remembering that a good rhetor always keeps the audience in mind, preachers would have taken audience illiteracy into consideration as they performed the liturgies and crafted their missionary sermons. The 1453 fall of Constantinople spurred the emigration to Italy of Greek intellectuals, who happily may have contributed their knowledge to the Western Renaissance, but who, sadly, abandoned the clergy and laity in the East to lives without access to education. Thus ended the long tradition of Byzantine scholarship.

For the lingering oral culture of Christianity’s entire audience, the liturgy’s role as an educational tool would have been critical because knowledge transmitted orally and repeated frequently is the way people in oral cultures learn. According to Ong,

Human beings in primary oral cultures ... learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not “study.” They learn by apprenticeship ... by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participating in a kind of corporate retrospection – not by study in the strict sense.²⁷

In a predominantly oral social context, liturgies would lend themselves to discipleship by conflating message and medium. The uninterrupted succession of chants and prayers, the musicality of tones and rhythms, the familiarity of neighbours and

²⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 9.

the mystery of context serve to transport the participants to God and God to them with the goal being knowledge of the divine. Here is the very basis of education in an oral society, since “knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost; fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration.”²⁸ Just as relevant to our focus on the importance of liturgy as catechetical instruction is Mircea Eliade’s suggestion that in such societies “reality is acquired through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is ‘meaningless,’ i.e., it lacks reality.”²⁹ Orality also encourages community, an important feature of a persecuted (quasi-secret) church. Ong explains:

The centering action of sound ... affects man’s sense of the cosmos.... [O]rally based thought and expression ... relate intimately to the unifying, centralizing, interiorizing economy of sound as perceived by human beings. A sound-dominated verbal economy is consonant with aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies.³⁰

So with the judicial and effective use of the tenets of classical rhetoric, the Church could both evoke the presence of God and contribute to a sense of ecclesial membership simultaneously.

Evoking divine presence requires a psychic integration among consciousness, context, and communication that both Ong and Burke characterize as “magic.”³¹ (We use this term provisionally, according to the two authors’ conventions.) The liturgy promotes the “magic” of God’s presence, as it prepares the faithful for, and climaxes in, the Eucharist, when bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ. The ability to perform this “magic” rests in the power and interiority of words inherent in oral cultures. Ong assigns God an essential presence inside people that allows “magic” to happen. Ong

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 34.

³⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 73.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33 and Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 44.

suggests that orality pilots presence out of the human interior on the vehicle of words: “the use of words in the Christian sacraments is the consequence of the presence among men of the incarnate Word of God.”³²

The fact that liturgical rituals are often repetitious, redundant, and participatory enhances their value in promoting the “magic” they demand. From a contemporary Western vantage point, such recitation indicates good memory. Thus, in the context of literate societies, rather than evoking God, the liturgy becomes a way to recall the words of the Bible, a sort of binding that the written text requires for literate worshippers to accept its reality, indeed, to be able to proclaim it as the only reality. Critically, memory plays “quite a different role in oral culture,”³³ in part due to the work of words, which have startling evocative effectiveness in oral societies. Notes Ong, “Oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words to have great power.”³⁴ With great power comes great “magic.” As Eliade stresses in his examination of mythical cycles, “the liturgy is precisely a commemoration of the life and Passion of the Saviour. . . . [T]his commemoration is in fact a re-actualization of those days,”³⁵ not a lament or celebration of the past. Schmemmann illustrates the validity of Eliade’s statement when he describes one such re-actualization: “Holy Thursday does not come to us; we come back to it, we again immerse ourselves in it.”³⁶ This is the kind of time, then, that can be identified both as “cyclic” and “eternal,” that Julia Kristeva attributes both to “mystical”³⁷ or pre-modern societies (as well as to contemporary women’s lived experience). Within the context of the liturgy, the Eucharist is understood not as a “cultural act of remembering,”³⁸ but rather as lived experience. Christ is in the house. The liturgy

³² Ong, *Presence of the Word*, 278–9.

³³ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 19.

³⁴ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32.

³⁵ Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, 23.

³⁶ Schmemmann, *The Journals*, 195.

³⁷ Julia Kristeva, “Woman’s Time,” in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, 1229.

³⁸ José J. Van Dijk, “Mediated Memories: Personal Cultural Memory as Object of Cultural Analysis,” in *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 18 (2004): 264.

succeeds in evoking divine presence for those who can reach the “residual oral state of consciousness.”³⁹

Despite being raised in the public environment of communist Bulgaria, Kristeva was educated in Orthodoxy by her father. Her interpretation that time can be both “cyclical and monumental,”⁴⁰ that it is experienced differently between women and men, begins in the orality that predates Christianity and is revealed in Christian tenets:

One is reminded of the various myths of resurrection which, in all religious beliefs, perpetuate the vestige of an anterior or concomitant maternal cult right up to its most recent elaboration. Christianity, for example, stresses that the body of the Virgin Mother does not die but moves from one spatiality to another within the same time via dormition (according to the Orthodox faith) or via assumption (the Catholic faith).⁴¹

Kristeva’s sense of cyclic and eternal time indicates that she experiences the Christian reactualization of events. While she finds significant corruptibility in living the Orthodox life, interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, she offers Orthodoxy as a path to authenticity in Western society. She notes:

I was fortunate enough, thanks to my father, to know and experience the strength of resistance that slumbers in the Orthodox faith. I love its sensuality, its mystery, the seclusion that makes us feel, in the celebration of the liturgy, the sorrows and joys of another world. It imbues us with the feeling – which is not rational certainty – that we are not of this world. An impression, certainly, and illusory, but so happy, so liberating, so creative of good fortune!⁴²

³⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 29.

⁴⁰ Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” 1254.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Kristeva, *Crisis of the European Subject* (New York: Other Press, 2000), 177.

Early Christian Precepts and Western Contexts

How can we claim today that vestigial orality plays a more important role in the Eastern Church's approach to rhetoric than it does in the Western Church? Ong directs our attention to the social context of Western Europe with the roots of positivism that segregated worship from education.⁴³ Compartmentalization and specialization were beginning to interrupt the integration of every aspect of life that typified ancient societies. This was as true in education as it became in the exercise of religion. Faced with an increasing number of compartments identified as disciplines, educators had to choose what to emphasize and what to de-emphasize. Continuing an assessment in the West that emerged regarding the Roman Second Sophistic, when rhetoric was characterized simply as puffery, rhetoric increasingly lost ground as a valued component of education. Indeed, Ong notes, "through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, rhetoric was a subject for little boys,"⁴⁴ "a means of teaching boys ... Latin style."⁴⁵ An institutionalized animosity in the Western education system joined the emergence of typographic culture to devalue rhetoric rapidly and effectively.

Ong chronicles Western education's rejection of rhetoric in his work on Peter Ramus, a particularly influential sixteenth-century French scholar, educator, and Protestant martyred in 1572. Ong suggests that the educational platform Ramus designed and promoted dealt a critical blow to rhetoric in the West. Its influences thrive in Western educational systems today. Ramism was:

a manifestation of the subtle and apparently irresistible shift sacrificing auditorily oriented concepts for visually oriented ones that sets in with medieval scholasticism and on which most of the characteristic manifes-

⁴³ See Walter Ong, *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, eds. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002), and *Orality and Literacy*.

⁴⁴ Ong, *An Ong Reader*, 218.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

tations of the modern as against the ancient world depend.... The shift is ... connected with the scholastic build-up of the teaching profession. It is connected with the invention of printing..., with the development of a sense of format for communication encouraged by printing, with the humanists' attitude toward language – a thing controlled by the *written* word, the word committed to space, not by *living* speech – as well as with the belief that all revelation was contained in a book.⁴⁶

Ong identifies the consequences of the shift from orality to literacy:

Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as primarily oral, as events, and hence as necessarily powered: for them, words tend rather to be assimilated to things, “out there” on a flat surface. Such “things” are not so readily associated with magic, for they are not actions, but are in a radical sense dead, though subject for dynamic resurrection.⁴⁷

While Western Europe was plumbing the depths of typographic awareness in a sort of steady, relentless historical progress, Eastern Europe experienced the advent of years very differently. Specifically, Ware explains,

western Christians ... have a common background ... profoundly influenced by the same events: by the papal centralization and the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages, by the Renaissance, by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. But behind members of the Orthodox Church – Greeks, Russians and the rest – there lies a very different background.... Christians in the west, both Roman and Reformed, generally start by asking the same questions, although they may disagree about the answers. In Orthodoxy, however,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 235.

⁴⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32–33.

... the questions themselves are not the same as in the west.⁴⁸

Comparing the literate nature of Western tradition to the demands that oral culture makes for evoking divine presence through the liturgy reveals the dialogic tension between the residual orality of Christian traditions and Western cultural context. This tension suggests that, to benefit from the liturgy as intended, Western-educated worshippers must be re-educated by their participation in the liturgy to value the psychodynamics of orality.

Reconciliation and Transformation

Modern Western European education's lack of sensitivity to orality may undergird contemporary Western churches' (both Catholic and Protestant) engagement with/in liturgy and its educational use. As we have argued, Eastern Churches may have retained traditions in their clerical and catechical training, "the uniquely Orthodox principle of religious education,"⁴⁹ that familiarize their congregations with the values concomitant with orality that enable the "magic" of presence and transubstantiation to be real. Significantly, such values were supported in the vestigial oral cultures of some of the more socially integrated host cultures for which Orthodoxy has served as a state religion. Ong identifies "indications of a high, if subsiding, oral residue in the culture of the Soviet Union ... when I encountered it."⁵⁰

Although Eastern Churches in Western Europe and North America may have a head-start in accepting and understanding how to use rhetoric in liturgical education, the education systems in Western cultures fund assumptions among both clerics and laity that contradict orality's values, and therefore may make achieving the "magical" elements of worship more difficult.

⁴⁸ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1963), 9.

⁴⁹ Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life*, 5.

⁵⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 38.

Providing clear evidence of vestigial orality in a Western social context in his discussion of the way words work, Kenneth Burke observes, “men share in the magical resources of some power by speaking ‘in the name of’ that power.”⁵¹ He says, “the ideal magic is that in which our assertions (or verbal decrees) as to the nature of the situation come closest to a correct gauging of that situation as it actually is,”⁵² and that this kind of magic can emerge in the form of a “spell” or “prayer.”⁵³ Burke’s ideas make possible a further observation. If our thesis is correct, that the liturgy is a key to the education and ultimate transformation of Orthodox Christians, the program of prayers invoke an interior reality that, in the moment, may in fact be extra-symbolic, subject to “what may be the inexorable law of non-symbolic motion which our symbolizing so often transcends,” sometimes to our “spiritual” gain and sometimes to our great detriment.⁵⁴

Burke identifies magic and mystery as features that play active roles in “maintaining cultural cohesion.”⁵⁵ Magic, according to Burke’s definition, is the capacity for transformation between two different kinds of beings.⁵⁶ He observes that “originally, the magical use of symbolism to affect processes by rituals and incantations was ... the use of addressed language to *induce action in people*,” to create the right attitude – “attitude being an incipient act.”⁵⁷ As to mystery, Burke says that it occurs when two kinds of beings are “thought of as in some way capable of communion.”⁵⁸

Mikhail Bakhtin would have been fully aware of this mystery. He writes of the “realm of religious thought and dis-

⁵¹ Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁵⁵ Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 174.

⁵⁶ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 65–66.

⁵⁷ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 42.

⁵⁸ Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 115.

course” as “mythological, mystical and magical.”⁵⁹ The significance of the liturgy as educational, though, emerges in how what Bakhtin learned in the service of God through Orthodoxy translates into his revolutionary theoretical analysis of language. Bakhtin could have developed his concept of heteroglossia, for example, quite naturally after experiencing and observing behaviours in and around the Russian Orthodox Church. Indeed he gives this example of the way heteroglossia works:

An illiterate peasant, miles away from any urban center, naively immersed in an unmoving and for him unshakable everyday world, nevertheless lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language (Church Slavonic), sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third and, when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through a scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language (the official-literate language, “paper” language.) All these are *different* languages, even from the point of view of abstract socio-dialectological markers. But these languages were not dialogically coordinated in the linguistic consciousness of the peasant; he passed from one to the other without thinking, automatically; each was indisputably in its own place, and the place of each was indisputable.⁶⁰

If not autobiographical, the hypothetical situation of the peasant is something that he very well could have observed as a youth before the Bolshevik Revolution.

The Orthodox Church before the Revolution could have served as a positive example of the environment of many languages, or heteroglossia. Heteroglossia emerges in the institutional structure of the Orthodox Church, “held together, not by a central organization, not by a single prelate wielding

⁵⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 351.

⁶⁰ Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 295–96.

absolute power over the whole body, but by the double bond of unity in the faith and communion in the sacraments.”⁶¹ It is decentralized under many heads rather than centralized under a pope, celebrating its holy rites and rituals in the many languages of its participants. The Roman Church, with its “one language of truth”⁶² could not have suggested heteroglossia. Did the Orthodox Church’s decentralized structure contribute to Bakhtin’s ability to interpret how “the decentralizing of the verbal-ideological world that finds its expression in the novel begins by presuming fundamentally differentiated social groups, which exist in intense and vital interaction with other social groups”?⁶³ Did Bakhtin’s celebration of the importance of decentralization, modeled by the Orthodox Church, contributed to his banishment to the nether-republics?

Bakhtin’s paragon of novel-writing, Dostoevsky, seems to have affected him deeply as much for the echoes of Orthodoxy in his work as for his art; the dialogic meeting of writer and critic in the work could only have occurred as the result of their common knowledge of Orthodoxy:

Dostoevsky was also linked directly with hagiographic literature and with Christian legends in their Orthodox forms, with their specific concept of trial. This is what gives organic unity to the adventures, confessions, problemativeness, saints’ lives, crises and rebirths in his novels, that is, the whole complex was already characteristic of the Helleno-Roman novel of trial.⁶⁴

Further, the concept of dialogism surfaces out of the personal relationship the Orthodox faithful learn that they have with God, the direct contact they have as they address God through the portals of their icons, through the prayers not only in church but also at home. Ong describes the importance of the dialogic to oral-based cultures: “An interlocutor is virtually essential [for analytic, complex thought]; it is hard to talk to

⁶¹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 15.

⁶² Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 271.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 392.

yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in oral cultures is tied to communication.⁶⁵ Orthodox believers enact sustained thought not only between themselves and their neighbours, but also with God through the vehicle of the icon. Even if neighbours do not understand the same concepts or speak the same language, God does. Thus, meaning occurs on the plane of the icon, a mystical space that dissolves any physical barrier between heaven and earth.

Bakhtin argued that “the absolute hegemony of myth over language as well as the hegemony of language over the perception and conceptualization of reality is, of course, located in the prehistorical (and therefore necessarily hypothetical) past of language consciousness.⁶⁶ If one accepts his logic, then one can accept the notion that Bakhtin’s own linguistic consciousness reflects the educational foundation he experienced and interiorized in the Orthodox liturgy.

A catechetical liturgy begins as the action of priest and confirmed participants, but arrives at transcendent, timeless, ageless moment. In this way, operating on an audience that has prepared itself by giving itself to the possibilities that vestigial orality provides, the liturgy makes God present. Only by resolving the tension between Western education and the values of orality or embracing the resulting ambiguity can participants arrive at the place that Schmemmann knows the liturgy can take them.

Ong offers hope when he observes that Westerners can bring the required values to church: “to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in high-technology ambience, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality.”⁶⁷ Further, current technology and the emergence of a new culture of communication, a “new age of secondary orality” or “post-typography,”⁶⁸ are characterized by “striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and

⁶⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

even its use of formulas.”⁶⁹ The new oral consciousness might enhance the ability of those educated in the Western system to appreciate orality, and might allow Christians to reconcile the tension between religious and secular cultures, or promote their ability to share a Christian body, by following Schmemmann’s proscription for the educational value of the liturgy.

Suggestions for Further Research

The nature of different educational traditions in the East and in the West may be one key to understanding how the liturgy may be appreciated and dismissed as a rhetorical strategy for catechesis, even within the same religious tradition. While the East seemed to find the partnership of spoken and written word useful in its mission of religious education, in the West rhetoric was abandoned as part of secular scholarship. Congregations often overlook the importance of worship as a means for making disciples and forming faith. Yet, its effectiveness in evoking divine presence is strong. This paper has proposed a foundation of rhetorical history to support Schmemmann’s arguments that the liturgy of the contemporary Orthodox Church should be embraced as a significant catechetical strategy rather than being relegated to the backwater of catechetical education. While Schmemmann was known for his numerous academic writings, lectures, and sermons, one of his most important contributions to liturgical renewal was reminding us that worship is primary. Thus, it would be helpful to re-read his sermons and writings as a way to once again learn the importance of worship and its role in catechesis and faith formation.

Examining rhetorical history, even broadly sweeping over two thousand years, can add another dimension to the depth and complexity of historical and social factors influencing Church practice and membership. Our broad examination, however, demands further, more detailed historical investigation and comparative analysis such as:

⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

- 1) Examining the influence the Orthodox tradition had on the thought of Bakhtin, Eliade and Kristeva among others who spent their formative years in cultures that historically hosted Orthodox churches.
- 2) Examining the success of evoking the non-symbolic presence of (a) God with the concept of religious “authenticity.”
- 3) Comparing educational traditions in Eastern and Western Europe, as well as North America, for their acceptance or rejection of rhetoric.
- 4) Examining the consequences of the Ramist method on Protestant teachings, both theological and lay, into the twenty-first century.
- 5) Comparing Christian religious traditions, particularly those of the Society of Friends and African American denominations, according to the emphasis these place on education in homiletics and other sanctuary practices.
- 6) Examining other cultures with roots in non-European educational traditions for evidence of orality and its influence on evoking (a) God’s presence in religious services.

This paper has argued that the Orthodox liturgy indeed serves as an educational strategy for an audience of believers duly prepared to accept it as such. Orthodox clergy celebrating in Western cultural environments must recognize and mitigate their congregation’s probable lack of preparedness to celebrate the liturgy as intended. Strategies might include catechism classes outside the liturgy as a complement rather than a substitution for the liturgy’s educational work. More than catechism, though, Orthodox Christians must be schooled in the value of orality, to experience the liturgy and participate in the liturgy outside of time as Western culture perceives it. This is the authenticity to which Kristeva directs us. With electronic orality permeating Western culture, Orthodox Christians may just be ready for such direction.



Резюме

Александр Шмеман (1921–1983) протягом усього життя намагався переконати православне священство, що богослуження є джерелом не лише контексту християнської науки, а й значною мірою самого її змісту. Його характеристика літургичного внеску в освіту та всебічну перемену православних християн резонує великою кількістю одночасних риторичних тем щодо індивідуальної та колективної тотожностей у постмодерному Західному світі. З точки зору риторики, потреба літургичної віднови, яку Шмеман наголошував, частково виникає через діалогічне протистояння між Східною та Західною інтелектуальними традиціями: протистояння між галактикою Гутенберга та світовим електронним селом, про яке вперше заговорив Маршал МакЛуган, як і між писемністю та новим мовленням, розглянутим Вальтером Онгом. Оскільки у Західних культурах з'являється нове мовлення, православне богослуження слугуватиме людям, які все частіше будуть приходити до храму, за катехизу, як це було у давні часи, коли Церква та культура, в якій Церква діяла, були тісно взаємозв'язані.

