

*The believers were first
called Christians at
Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26
NOVEMBER-
DECEMBER 2006

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan Parkstone, Dorset

The Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of The United Kingdom and Ireland
Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

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THE FACE OF GOD

The Leader of the House of Commons and former Foreign Secretary, Mr. Jack Straw, has recently raised a controversy over the covering of the face in public by Muslim women. It has raised matters of concern over integration and so-called cultural diversity. It has tested the limits of multiculturalism and has focused attention in the media yet again on the influence of a sizeable minority religion in Britain.

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the issue, it highlights the gulf that exists between the claims of the world's two greatest religions. In particular, from our own Orthodox understanding of Christianity, the issue of 'seeing the face' lies at the very core of what we believe.

For us, even alongside the various heterodox versions of Christianity (about 25,000 different varieties: Roman Catholicism and all its offshoots,) Christianity means Orthodoxy; there can be no other in its fullness. Yet, from the outset, we are happy to respect the fact that people have different beliefs, cultures and identities. This is basic humane tolerance, it is good manners and general politeness. We do, though, need to be honest: toleration means live-and-let-live; it does not imply approval or agreement.

The old modernism, born of the 18th Century Enlightenment, would have us dismiss theistic religions as superstition. The present post-modern climate would cajole us into thinking that all religions are equally valid and are part of a person's lifestyle choice. The only crime is to claim an exclusive hold on the truth. No wonder that a liberal society finds a fundamentalist religion, based on a so-called revealed holy book, such a puzzle.

Yet, leaving Islam to one side, when it comes to the means of salvation, we too must plead guilty. We have to say that we know of no other assured path to the saving of our souls than through Orthodox Christianity. So, although we must, in charity, accept anyone's right to worship how he will; to believe what he will (saving where it may do harm to others), we are not obliged to curtail what we are in order to accommodate their cultural norms, especially if those norms have been introduced on top of our own culture from the outside. Though I might respect the Muslim's right to believe that Mohammad was the last prophet, that does not mean that I must accept him as such; indeed, of course I do not - if I did, I should have to be a Muslim!

The recent controversy, however, has shown up the differences between Christianity and Islam. From our perspective, the faith of Mohammad is just a reversion to the Old Testament; we find nothing new in it. To be fair, Muslims teach that Christianity became corrupted after the departure of the 'prophet Jesus' and false teaching was put into the New Testament. This is why, they would claim, that God had finally to call Mohammad as his last prophet. I will, if you'll pardon the illusion, draw a discrete veil over that idea...

The point is, Islamic theology is different from ours; they conceive of God in a way incompatible with our experience. Here then, are the roots of the issue, linking up to the present controversy over the veiling of the face. Islamic theology, like Jewish theology before it, never managed to resolve the matter of transcendence and immanence in God's dealing with mankind: is God distant or near. Clearly, both of

Religions are theistic - there is a personal god with whom the believer has an *I-Thou* relationship. But the personal in God has never been resolved in their respective theologies. Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, has from its experience, grasped the mystery as far as God has made it known: that there is one, *tri-personal* Godhead. That the united three persons of the Trinity share the same divine nature, united in one being, originating from the source who is the Father, from whom the Son is eternally begotten and the Spirit eternally proceeding. The simple monad, known in Islam or Judaism will not do in the end. If God is love, the all-sufficient singularity will not do. There is no such thing as love with out an object to love. If love is an energy (not the essence or nature) of God, as we are hold, where else can it be focused? It cannot be a duality, focused only on *a son of God*, for that is too exclusive. God has to be a Trinity for there we see the love of God expressed in community; God is a *community* of persons from whom we are created, for mankind is a social creature. He was not compelled to make us as a kind of *object* for his attention but made us as an outpouring of his generous and selfless love.

That steadfast love of God is witnessed to in the Old Testament. It is often forgotten by Christians that the *Lord* spoken of in the Old Testament is not the Father, but is Christ though not yet fully revealed to Israel. His face is hidden, as in the story of Moses who is only permitted to see God from behind, [Exodus 33:18-23]. He does not see God's face. For the same reason the Decalogue condemns the making of divine

(continued from front page...) images [Ex.20: 4-6]. Yet, as the New Testament and the Great Feasts of the Church bear witness, the face of God is made known to us. In the Transfiguration [Matt.17:1-8] the Godhead shines through the human body of the God-Man. We are soon to celebrate the revelation of that mystery whereby God reveals himself in our form through the Incarnation. The face of God is revealed and our creation in the image and likeness of God is restored. From now on, God has given himself an image on earth and it is in a human face, not veiled but openly displayed [cf. 2 Cor.3:13-18]. No wonder the *icon* is the test of Orthodoxy. Without the holy icons how can there be any understanding of what the Incarnation means? How can there be the fullness of the Christianity without the veneration of the holy image? 'Seeing the face' is the very essence of our belief! And not only in the icon of Christ, but by grace, in his saints, his holy Mother and all whose faces shone - like St. Seraphim before Count Motolilov in the snow. And further still, we must venerate the image of Christ in one another (that, after all is the meaning of the censuring of everyone during the Liturgy, venerating the image of Christ in you and me.) That is why we venerate the image of Christ in all others and especially the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the imprisoned, the sick, even where that holy image is still hidden: in the Jew, the Muslim, the pagan and the non-believer.

It is interesting that one of the words for *person* in the New Testament is Προσωπον [Prosopon] which literally means *the face*; it is connected with the masks or faces worn by actors in the theatres of ancient Greece. From our perspective the hiding of the face in public seems to imply the designation of the hidden one as a non-person; as if such a one had no social status or recognition. Also, we are instinctively suspicious of someone who won't show his/her face; the wearing of a mask in public has too many nefarious connotations. The idea of dressing modestly is, of course, considered important in the Christian way of life. We know of the pious custom of women veiling their heads in church out of respect for the presence of the

Holy angels. Similarly women leading the religious life in monasteries wear the veil. But these latter have withdrawn from the world yet they have not hidden their faces. That certain Muslim women choose to do so for cultural or religious reasons is their affair, though there are situations in our culture where it would, clearly, not be acceptable; they will just have to accept that on the principle of *'when in Rome...'* So, although we might tolerate seeing women thus appearing on our streets, they cannot complain if we find it distinctly odd. They cannot expect that we embrace and accept their peculiar set of values when we regard them as suffering a self-inflicted dehumanisation.

Meanwhile, for us, belonging to the Church is not membership of a cultural museum or the opting for a 'valid lifestyle', one among many. The Church is the Body of Christ - we have to *show our faces* there and being transfigured, changed from glory to glory, we must show that same face to those who are still seeking the face of God.

"It is the same God who said, 'Let there be light shining out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ."

[2 Cor.4:6]

Fr. Chrysostom

Dates and topics of the Study Group Sessions

OCTOBER

31 The Orthodox Church? Why can't we have churchless Christianity?

NOVEMBER

14 The Liturgy - Why are the services so important?

21 Orthodox Anthropology - the understanding of Mankind and the goal of theosis

DECEMBER

12 Theology - the Orthodox understanding of God.

19 The Holy Mysteries - the transforming character of the sacramental life.

JANUARY

9 Orthodox Spirituality - prayer and the ascetic endeavour.

SERVICES

Usual weekday services:

Wednesday: Hours & Typika

10.00am Paraklesis 6.00pm

Friday: Hours & Typika 10.00am

NOVEMBER

Sat 4th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 5th Twenty-first after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Sat 11th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 12th Twenty-second after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Wednesday 15th

Beginning of the Nativity Fast

Sat 18th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 19th Twenty-third after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Tues 21st Entry of the

Theotokos

Sat 25th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 26th Twenty-fourth after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

DECEMBER

Sat 2nd Vespers 6.30pm

Sun 3rd Twenty-fifth after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Sat 9th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 10th Twenty-sixth after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Sat 16th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 17th Twenty-seventh after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Fri 22nd Royal Hours 9.00am

Sat 23rd Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 24th Eve of the Nativity

9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Mon 25th

The Nativity of Our Lord

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy of St. Basil 10.30am

Sat 30th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 31st Sunday after the

Nativity Orthros 9.00am

Divine Liturgy 10.30am