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Creating an Indigenous Multicultural Faith: The Russian Orthodox Mission in Alaska and the Centrality of Cosmology

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Creating an Indigenous Multicultural Faith: The Russian Orthodox Mission in Alaska and the

Centrality of Cosmology

A Senior Paper

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By

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Introduction

In 1794, Russia sent the first missionaries to Alaska in the form of eight monks from Valaam monastery and two monks from Konev Monastery to begin the work of converting, catechizing, and baptizing the native Alaskans.¹ They found the native Alaskans in a deplorable serf-like condition in service to the Russians. By siding with the native Alaskans, the monks often faced discrimination, house arrest, and assassination attempts by secular authorities as the monks chastised the company's use of the natives for slave labor.² The early acrimony between the company and the Russian Orthodox Church subsided as priests protested to the Russian government about the company's actions. Successive missionaries worked at translating the Holy Scriptures and divine services into native languages and taught bilingual education to natives and Creoles alike. It is the basis of their work and the missiology of the Orthodox Christian faith that they learned the language and culture and communicated the faith in terms that the native Alaskans could understand.

Through these efforts and more, Orthodox Christianity became incarnate in the native Alaskan culture as it was transformed into a genuinely multicultural faith the Indigenous people could call their own.³ Even after financial support and administrative guidance disappeared from Russia after the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Orthodox Church in Alaska depended solely on the support of the natives, and not only survived but grew. This commitment and devotion are

¹Richard A. Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in America, 1794-1837*, translated by Colin Bearne (Ontario: Limestone Press, 1978) 26.

²Sergei Korsun and Lydia Black, *Herman A Wilderness Saint*, translated by Priest Daniel Marshall (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Press, 2012), 55.

³As it is impossible to go through the particulars of every instance Orthodox Christianity manifested herself in the Indigenous cultures of Alaska in a 36-page paper, this paper will focus exclusively on the "why" and elements of the "how" this manifestation was able to take place.

rooted in the patristically testified and liturgically celebrated aspects of Orthodoxy that the Indigenous cultures immediately identified with: the cosmic spirituality and dimension of Eastern Christianity. Any defense of the spiritual self-identity and traditions of the Indigenous Alaskan cultures demands a theological articulation as the Orthodox Church has linked her identity and destiny with that of the native Alaskans against the rising tide of secularizing forces and assimilationism in their native lands and cultures.⁴

The approach of the Orthodox mission differed dramatically from the methods used by western missionaries. This paper will analyze how the centrality of cosmology contributed to the Orthodox evangelization of the native Alaskans and prove that there was neither syncretism nor supplantation, but rather the building of a multicultural Indigenous society transformed by the teachings of the Orthodox Christian culture.

Methodology

This paper applies letters, journals, history interviews, government-company contracts, international treaties, theological works, and images to examine the convergence of Russian Orthodox Christianity and Alaskan Indigenous shamanism cultures to explicate the harmonizing of an Indigenous multicultural Christian faith in nineteenth-century Russian

⁴In the preface of the 1985 legal review *Village Journey: The Report of the Alaska Native Review Commission*, Justice Thomas R. Berger writes on the plight that native Alaskans (and similarly other traditional native cultures around the world) face in the modern world: “Some persons are skeptical of the Natives’ claim to a special attachment to their land. They are worried by the fact that the Native peoples believe in self-determination and a just settlement of their land claims rather than letting themselves be quietly assimilated. At the other extreme, there are persons who romanticize the Natives, trying to discover in them qualities lost by urban residents, and are dismayed when Natives do not conform to an idealized image. It has not been easy for the people of village Alaska to be heard. For many years, they have been caught up in the cultural uncertainties of assimilationist policies... Native peoples everywhere insist that their own culture is still the vital force in their lives; the one fixed point in a changing world is their identity as Natives” (Thomas R. Berger, *Village Journey: The Report of the Alaska Native Review Commission* (United States of America: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985) vii).

Alaska.⁵ Central to this examination is the evaluation of effects of Orthodox Christian missiology on native Alaskans and the Indigenous religio-cultural response to Russian missionaries.

Not merely a historical overview of contact between natives and missionaries in Russian Alaska, this paper harmonizes the commonality of cosmology between native Alaskan shamanism and Orthodox Christianity. It analyzes the impacts of comparatively culturally-tolerant Russian evangelism on pre-Christian native beliefs and practices and contrasts with subsequent western Christian evangelism in Alaska. Analysis of Saint Maximus the Confessor's theanthropic cosmology is woven into the process of Russian missionary activity. The significance of Saint Maximus as the underlying principle in guiding religio-cultural points of contact between Orthodoxy and native cultures in Alaska serves as an example of cultural tolerance in Christian missions that displays neither religious syncretism nor cultural supplantation by a dominant culture. This is a principle that is all too often ignored by scholars in the West most likely because of their unfamiliarity with Orthodox theanthropic cosmology, which this paper seeks to correct in order to precipitate future academic discussion of European missions among Indigenous cultures.

Scholarship Review

The period commonly known as Russian Alaska focuses on Russian activities in Alaska between Vitus Bering's historic and, tragically, last voyage in 1741 to the sale of the Alaskan territory to the United States in 1867. There has been a great deal written on the Russian missionaries by Orthodox and non-Orthodox scholars alike. Both groups of scholars, at best, tentatively agree that the history of Russian Alaska and the development of the Indigenous

⁵Most primary sources in this paper are found in secondary sources, as the widespread publishing of primary texts, particularly in English translations, does not exist yet.

culture was inseparable from contact with Russian missionaries and played significant roles in future cultural conflicts when Alaska was transferred to the control of the United States in 1867. American historiography on Alaska before the 1960s has been abysmal in light of scholarly work done post-1960s, as scholars proved to be extremely biased towards a narrative of American triumphalism and discounts any mention of Russian interactions pre-1867. Their work will not be considered in this paper.⁶ The scholars considered here represent a few of the leading American contemporary and most authoritative scholarly work conducted since then.

Father Michael Oleksa (*Orthodox Alaska: A Mission of Theology*) is one of the leading contemporary Orthodox scholars on Russian Alaska. He argues that the conflict between the clergy and the Russian American Company has received less attention than it deserves. Modern historians erroneously assume that since the Orthodox Church was the established church of the Russian Empire and governed by the state through a synod, the clergy constituted a privileged class of petty bureaucrats whose function in Alaska was to pacify the natives and assist the colonial regime in subduing a recalcitrant population by convincing them that it was their Christian duty to obey their superiors.⁷ The existing documents testify that no cooperation took place between the clergy and the company; the clergy always defended the rights of the natives, and the company saw this as an obstacle to making a profit. Sergei Kan (*Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries*), a contemporary secular scholar, known for his work on the Tlingit native peoples and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, makes the case that Father John Veniaminov synthesized native cultural practices with

⁶It can be asserted that American historiography prior to the 1960s was very much infused with the ideals of Manifest Destiny.

⁷Michael Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992) 109.

Orthodox Christian practices. He asserts that Veniaminov was only successful in this endeavor because he combined Orthodox theology with western Enlightenment principles, therefore adopting a more culturally tolerant approach.

Andrei Znamenski (*Shamanism and Christianity: Native Encounters with Russian Orthodox Missions in Siberia and Alaska, 1820-1917*), likewise a contemporary secular scholar, has written numerous works examining Orthodox Christian interactions with Indigenous tribes in Siberia and Alaska. He makes the interesting presentation that Orthodox missionaries were able to be as successful as they were because the natives dictated the missionaries' approach to their pre-Christian beliefs, integrating what beliefs were useful and discarding what was not per their strategies of survival in the harsh climates they lived.

It should be noted that what could be pieced together and known about the Indigenous cultures that gave the name "shamanism" in the modern lexicon is reported primarily by scholarly works; in other words, there are no "primary" sources expositing native beliefs written by natives prior to Russian contact. This is further explained in the "Native Cultures and Beliefs of Alaska" section of this paper, but the fact remains that there were and continues to be a strong oral tradition maintained by Indigenous tribes and there is a highly pluralistic character as to the nature of these traditions. It is largely up to scholars who are not part of these traditions to determine a proper presentation of these cultures and beliefs. It should be further noted that out of these three contemporary scholars, Michael Oleksa is the only scholar that has lived and interacted with these tribes for most of his life, whereas the others have not.

Background

The beginnings of Alaskan Orthodox Christianity are rooted in the interactions of Russians with native Alaskans after the exploration efforts of Vitus Bering and Alexis Chirikov in 1728 and 1741. Heralding the “Fur Rush,” Siberian Russian fur traders known as *promyshlenniki* flocked to the fur-rich regions of the Alaskan archipelago and won the region over to the Russian Empire after a brief, bloody struggle for control.⁸ The *promyshlenniki* often intermarried into the Alaskan tribes and sent their creole children to Russia for education. The creoles returned to Alaska, many becoming the *toens*, or chiefs, of their tribes and proselytized among their fellow natives, setting the foundations for a native Christian faith in the Orthodox tradition.⁹

The lack of an official Russian intervention with the imperial army and the nature of fur-trading businesses in colonizing Alaska set the tone for the rest of the Russian presence in Alaska. In comparison to other colonial ventures in the New World, the Russian presence in Alaska was significantly languorous by all aspects, as they preferred to trade with the native Alaskans from Aleutian island bases and not to seek to outpopulate and replace the native tribes.

What is interesting is the direct contrast of Russian colonization efforts at this time to not the western world, but to one of her East Asian neighbors, Japan. A famous Japanese political thinker, Honda Toshiaki (1744-1821), wrote in 1798 lamenting the poor Japanese colonization efforts in comparison to the Russians, saying that:

⁸David J. Nordlander, *For God & Tsar: A Brief History of Russian America, 1741-1867* (Anchorage: Alaska Natural History Association, 1994), 4.

⁹Vyacheslav Ivanov, *The Russian Orthodox Church of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands and Its Relation to Native American Traditions—An Attempt at a Multicultural Society, 1794-1912* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1997), 27. ; Ivanov also asserts that *toen* is a Siberian and Russian American word of Iakut origin that came to mean a native Alaskan appointed by the Russian American Company to assist in collecting furs from the tribe (37).

[the Russians] have displayed such diligence in their colonization efforts that eighteen or nineteen Kurile islands and the great land of Kamchatka have already been occupied. Forts are said to have been built at various places and a central administration established, the staff of which is regularly changed, and which rules the natives with benevolence. I have heard that the natives trust them as they would their own parents. In Japan, on the other hand, this system is as yet not followed. It is forbidden to teach Japanese to any natives. These are supplemented by a host of other prohibitions. It is a most lamentable system which has as its object keeping barbarians forever in their present condition. Since Russians operate under a system that provides that their own subjects are sent out to live among the natives, it is only to be expected that the Ainu¹⁰ look up to the Russian officials as gods and worship them.¹¹

While Toshiaki appears to be exaggerating for effect in order to shame the Tokugawa government into competing in the north Pacific, it is true that a high linguistic diversity and high literacy rate existed in Russian colonial territories among native populations. This is due to the efforts of clergy such as Father John Veniaminov, Father Jacob Netsvetov, and other skilled representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church.¹² This is one of the immediate striking differences of Russian colonial endeavors in terms of multiculturalism compared to every other colonial power.

The Native Cultures and Beliefs of Alaska

Åke Hultkrantz, a world-renowned authority on the Siberian and northern North American shamanist cultures and beliefs, argues that from a religio-ecological perspective, native cultures in northern Siberia and Alaska constituted the same type of religion, showing analogies such as environmentally-oriented worldviews, animal ceremonialism, and a strong

¹⁰Natives of the Kurile Islands to the north of Hokkaido Island.

¹¹Ivanov, *The Russian Orthodox Church of Alaska*, 4.

¹²*Ibid.*, 3.

emphasis on shamanism.¹³ Religious studies expert S. A. Thorpe agrees in his comparisons between Siberian and Alaskan shamanism, arguing that a generalized worldview does not lose validity.¹⁴ The personal beliefs of the natives across these vast and harsh landscapes reflected the need for a pragmatic approach to spirituality, stressing spiritual improvisation without strict codes or reforms filtering through personal and tribal experiences with a shaman always at the center.¹⁵

At its core, native religions in these ecospheres were concerned with well-being in this world and dealt little with Christian concepts such as salvation and deification, the two being mutually inclusive in Orthodox Christianity. One notable exception is that the Aleuts on Kodiak Island did believe in the immortality of the human soul and in life after death, noted by one of the Russian monks in a native song that went, “Enough of weeping! This world is not immortal: Aknak¹⁶ has died as a person and will come to life again.”¹⁷ Znamenski argues that the character of native beliefs was a continuing search for spiritual tools to cope with existing reality. If native communities were to be successful, then they had to generate spiritual/medicinal power via the shamans. This, in turn, was acquired by dialogue with natural forces.¹⁸ Although some scholars

¹³Andrei A. Znamenski, *Strategies of Survival: Native Encounters with Russian Missionaries in Alaska and Siberia, 1820s-1917* (ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: 1997) 74.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 73

¹⁶The name of the deceased.

¹⁷Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 20.

¹⁸Znamenski, *Strategies of Survival*, 92.

idealize native wisdom and supposed ecological awareness, it is hard to deny the pragmatism of indigenous peoples towards their surroundings.

Saint Innocent of Alaska, known as Father John Veniaminov in academic circles, confirms these scholarly observations at the time in his “Notes about the Islands of the Unalaska District.” He confirms the nature of the Aleut beliefs, that they had no well-developed mythology or strictly worked-out beliefs, stating, “Without worshipping one God they worshipped anything that seemed more powerful than themselves.”¹⁹ However, in reference to the Kodiak Aleuts, he does observe that they believed in a Creator, whom they called Aguluk (Creator). The Kodiak Aleuts had so abstracted the idea of the Aguluk that Veniaminov declared that they “kept him too far separated from the ruling of the world,”²⁰ and thus did not worship him.

The Indigenous cultures of Alaska maintain a robust oral tradition for passing on their culture—intricately connected to their religious beliefs—to educate and instill in their children the traditional values of the tribe that had always been believed and practiced. Native Alaskans primarily accomplished the Christian evangelization of these tribes and Creole converts through oral transmission. Natives listened to the sacred stories and traditions and brought their families to baptism at the hands of laymen and priests when they were available.²¹ None of these practices required trained clergy or the use of the Holy Scriptures and other writings, although this native diffusion further strengthened the catechism process conducted by clergy. In essence,

¹⁹John Veniaminov, *Notes on the Islands of the Unalashka District*, translated by Lydia T. Black and R. H. Geoghegan and edited by Richard A. Pierce (Ontario: Limestone Press, 1984) 18.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 152.

teaching remained a function of the family, creating each Orthodox parent a teacher and missionary within the family.²²

Contrary to popular belief, Christianity—as Orthodoxy believes it—is not a “religion of the book,” as Father John Behr, an Orthodox Church theologian, asserts that the essentially oral nature of early Christianity had to take on a literary nature to combat heresy.²³ Nor is it clericalist by creating a gulf between clergy and laity, as Pierre Pascal states that “pastors are so very close to their flocks [because] the ‘distance’ necessary for respect is lacking, as also any superiority of an intellectual or moral sort... Russian popular religion is about as un-clerical as it could be, not in any way tied to the clergy.”²⁴ These two factors contributed mainly to the spreading of Orthodoxy by native forces in a system that transmitted culture in the same way as Orthodoxy.²⁵

The Nature of Orthodox Missiology towards Native Cultures

Claiming an unbroken lineage of nearly 2,000 years as the historical church founded by Jesus Christ, the Orthodox rest their authority on dogmatic belief as established by the Holy Tradition²⁶ of the Apostles, the Holy Scriptures, and the Church Fathers’ defenses of the

²²Ibid., 153.

²³John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology Vol. 1: The Way to Nicaea*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 2001) 15.

²⁴Pierre Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976) 19. ; Pascal continues, “It would not cross a peasant’s mind to abandon the church because he thought the priest unworthy. The inadequacy of the clergy will never put his faith at risk. It can be practiced, if circumstances dictate, in the humblest oratory or simply at home... When there is neither church nor priest, the head of the family can conduct a simplified form of worship at home” (20-21).

²⁵These characteristics still exist in Orthodox Alaska today.

²⁶To the Orthodox Christian, Holy Tradition is the deposit of faith delivered by Jesus Christ to the Holy Apostles, who then passed it on their disciples and continues to the present day. Vladimir Lossky describes it as “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.” It should be noted that the Orthodox definition of “tradition” is different in that it is not seen as a collection of practices or beliefs accrued over time; it is simply the beliefs and practices that

“orthodox catholic” belief that was expressed everywhere and at all times by believers throughout her history. Although it is well beyond the scope of this paper to examine in-depth cosmology as defined by the Orthodox Church, an examination of cosmology as seen by Saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662) will see how this ties into the Orthodox mission into Alaska. To understand this cosmology is to understand why the Orthodox Church differs in her approach to missiology compared to the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.

The practical cosmology of Orthodox Christianity was the key to finding a unique commonality in the worldview of Indigenous shaman culture. The Russian monks and missionaries were not graduates of theology schools, but plain, simple men who lived and experienced an unbroken mystical theology of nearly 2,000 years. Their lives were not determined by practical worldly usefulness unlike western Christian monasticism but strove to love the world, everyone, and everything in it. To the Orthodox, cosmology is present not in theory, but by experience, so although they knew of Saint Maximus, they were mostly unfamiliar with his theological language.

There is a cosmic dimension to the mission of Christ and the mission of the Church missing in modern western Christian thought and practice.²⁷ Drawing scriptural support from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Colossians,²⁸ Maximus says everything exists for a reason by the

have always been believed and practiced at all times and by all believers since the establishment of the Church at Pentecost. Holy Tradition is unchanging in dogma yet dynamic in application.

²⁷For more on the specifics of this division between western and eastern theology on cosmology, reference the addendum at the end of this paper.

²⁸In particular, “For in him, all things were created, in the heavens and on earth, things visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers; all things have been created through him, and for him.” Colossians 1:16 (EOB: The Eastern/Greek Orthodox New Testament)

Logos, the divine plan or Word.²⁹ Creation's reason derives from the Reason for which the world was made. The Word Logos is embodied in the whole creation, in the Scriptures, and finally in Jesus Christ. God loves the whole cosmos that He sends His Son. The mission of the Church extends to the earth, plants, and animals, not just humans. This is where Christianity and traditional tribal beliefs overlap. This is how the missionaries were able to preserve the Gospel as the fulfillment of what the tribes already believed without striving to destroy their culture and way of life. The Orthodox celebration of this Cosmic dimension is expressed at every baptism and in the Great Blessing of Water celebrated at Theophany every January seen in Saint Sophronios of Jerusalem's (560-638)³⁰ hymn:

At the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord,'³¹ Thou hast come, O Lord, taking the form of a servant,³² and Thou who knowest not sin dost ask for baptism. *The waters saw Thee and were afraid;*³³ the Forerunner was seized with trembling and cried aloud, saying: 'How shall the lamp illuminate the Light? How shall the servant set his hand upon the Master? O Saviour who takest away the sin of the world, *sanctify both me and the waters.*'³⁴

Oleksa finds that all tribal peoples in Alaska believe that the land they live on is the land God has given them. They believe they have been entrusted with that land and to use it for their practical purposes, but also to take care of it and preserve it for future generations. They depend entirely on the land's ecosystem, and their life is attuned to the rhythms of the ecosystem; every

²⁹Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua Vol. I*, translated and edited by Nicholas Constas (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 97.

³⁰Saint Sophronios of Jerusalem was most likely the unnamed spiritual elder of Saint Maximus

³¹Mark 1:3

³²Philippians 2:7

³³Psalms 75 (76):17

³⁴Saint Sophronios of Jerusalem, excerpt from *Festal Menaion*, trans. by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, (Crestwood, NY: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1998) 172.

rock on the hills, every bend in the rivers, and every animal in their habitations. Each successful hunt is treated as a gift from nature, and the human response is one of humility and thankfulness, so every part of an animal is used with purpose. The Indigenous cultures come to love that land and know its inherent sanctity.

Likewise, the Orthodox Christian attitude is to see the world Eucharistically in all things, and nature is not divorced from the sanctity of the world. The missionaries took time to understand the natives' way of life and their spiritual connection to the land they lived on and found a harmonizing of similar worldviews present in both the centrality of the Holy Eucharist³⁵ and the Blessing of the Great Waters at Theophany. The act of blessing the waters seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2 is to consciously realize God's blessing of life itself as all living things draw life from water, even though nature does not require man to do this as God already sanctified nature from the beginning. It is this consciousness of nature that the native Alaskans found harmony within Orthodox Christianity, which was lost in western natural theology.³⁶

It is incorrect to believe that the Orthodox approach to finding "truths" in heterodox³⁷ beliefs is simply religious syncretism, as Hieromonk Damascene (Christensen) first establishes such syncretism as regarding all paths as possessing equal truth simultaneously, which when

³⁵In the Orthodox Christian faith, the Holy Eucharist (literally meaning "sacrifice"), or the "remembrance meal" of the Last Supper is far more encompassing than the mystical transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. It is in fact the "sacrament of sacraments" in which all created things lead to and flows from, existing in neither time nor space. To see the world Eucharistically is to offer it as sacrifice to God, yet the paradox is that God requires nothing from humanity, only the consciousness of the human heart of His love for all of creation, which is a love that transforms creation should creation accept it.

³⁶For further reference on native beliefs channeling into Orthodoxy similar to Oleksa's analysis, read S.A. Mousalimas' *The Transition from Shamanism to Russian Orthodoxy in Alaska* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995).

³⁷Meaning not conforming to accepted or orthodox standards and/or beliefs.

doing so, forces itself to disregard certain basic distinctions or offer complicated explanations that attempt to rationalize these distinctions away.³⁸ Therefore, the Church Fathers in their approach to the Greco-Roman Hellenist philosophies of their time were more honest and discerning, realizing that there was and is an “unfolding” of wisdom throughout the ages that pointed towards the Christian revelation, much like a broken mirror or a reflection on choppy water. This was not syncretism or incorporation of pagan Greek philosophies into already existing fundamental Christian beliefs (such is seen in Maximus refuting Origen who did make this error), but rather taking the words and many of the concepts of pagan philosophers and reinterpreting them in the light of divine revelation. They redefined pre-existing Greek philosophical terms that did not express Christian truths accurately.

Saint Justin Martyr in the second century and Lactantius in the third century both praised Socrates for his refraining from setting forth explicit teachings on what had not been divinely revealed to him. As Socrates said, “It is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it possible to declare Him to all,”³⁹ to which Saint Justin Martyr responded, “Christ was partially known even by Socrates, for He was and is the Logos Who is in every person.” They acknowledged the falsehoods in the ancient sages, as Lactantius writes, “People of the highest genius touched upon the truth, and almost grasped it, had not custom, infatuated by false opinions, carried them back.” Saint Justin Martyr said this of the truths spoken by the philosophers, “Whatever things were truly said among people belong to us Christians.”

³⁸Damascene Christensen, *Christ the Eternal Tao* (Platina, CA: Valaam Books, 2017) 40.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 43.

The Kodiak Mission 1794-1837

Many studies of the Russian missionary interactions with the natives of Siberia and Alaska tend to overlook or outright ignore substantial factors that contributed to the nature of such missions. This paper will attempt to address Znamenski's criticism that Orthodox missionaries in Alaska only acted as tolerantly of native cultures as they did because of a lack of firm central control unlike Peter the Great's Russification policies in Siberia.⁴⁰ In Siberia, the lackluster missionary attempts were conducted in a period that is generally acknowledged by Orthodox scholars as a dark time for Russian Orthodoxy.⁴¹ The centuries-old patriarchate⁴² was abolished in 1721 and a synod introduced under the indirect control of Peter the Great, who desired a secular control of the state church similar to the western countries he visited. Russification edicts were handed down to the Russian Orthodox Church by the imperial government through *ukases* as she continued her missionary drives eastward across Siberia, leading to resistance from the natives to Christianity and improper Russian cultural chauvinism among many—but not all—clergy. All clergy from 1721 until the reestablishment of the ancient Russian patriarchate in 1917 worked as official government agents.

However, despite the Russian Church's central authority being forced to bow to imperial initiatives until it could break free in August 1917, backlash against Russification edicts existed among the clergy at this time, with the Illuminski system proving to be the most successful in

⁴⁰Znamenski, *Strategies for Survival*, 147-148.

⁴¹For further reference, Alfeyev's *Orthodox Christianity Volume I The History and Canonical Structure of the Orthodox Church* chapter "The Russian Church During the Synodal Period" (171-255) for the Orthodox view of Peter the Great's church reforms.

⁴²The Moscow patriarchate was an important power that rivaled the imperial ambitions of Peter the Great, causing him to exploit the death of Patriarch Adrian in 1700 for personal political gain.

bringing the Christian message to the natives of Siberia in their own language.⁴³ Znamenski's attempt to criticize the Orthodox missionary endeavors (already being hindered by secular imperial control) based on weak imperial control scattered over vast distances is not a fair evaluation when considering these factors. The example of the cultural tolerance and successful conversion of the Slavic peoples conducted by the Greek monks SS. Cyril and Methodius could easily counter such assertions. His argument that the "'power' of the Russian Church arose very much from its weakness" and thus prevented the collision of cultures between Russians and natives unlike what happened throughout the rest of the New World in the age of western colonization serves only to strengthen the Orthodox argument of commonality with traditional cultures, not weaken it.

Interestingly, Znamenski does note that Peter the Great primarily sent Jesuit-influenced Orthodox missionaries from the Kiev Theological Academy to enforce Russification policies in hand with Christian evangelism.⁴⁴ Such an assertion throws the validity of true Orthodox mission under Peter the Great and his immediate successors in Siberia even further into doubt, as Jesuit missionary theology is irreconcilable with Orthodox missiology and the Latinization of the Kiev Theological Academy was challenged and eventually pushed out by the nineteenth century by Russian clergy.⁴⁵ Znamenski's claim of a "medieval style die-hard Orthodoxy" existing before

⁴³The Illuminski system was a Siberian system of mission in Siberia that reflected many universal Orthodox approaches to Indigenous cultures such as translations of sacred writings into the native vernacular. Otherwise unimportant and virtually unknown, it was recognized by the 1910 Siberian Missionary Congress as a far superior alternative to past Russification models of Christianization (Znamenski, *Strategies for Survival*, 132).

⁴⁴Znamenski, *Strategies for Survival*, 120.

⁴⁵For further reference, Father Georges Florovsky's magnum opus *Ways of Russian Theology* (Nordland, 1979) analyzes the spread and eventual repulse of Jesuit and other Latin theological influences from Russia in the Age of the Counter-Reformation to the nineteenth century.

Catherine the Great's "rationalistic and universalist ideas" falls apart under closer examination of these prominent factors and betrays a lack of in-depth knowledge about Orthodox theology and church history.⁴⁶

Likewise, Znamenski and Kan conveniently skip the crucial "first contact" period with the natives of Alaska by having little to no mention of it and focus instead on a period that saw more conciliatory church-state relations under Father John Veniaminov. The period of the Kodiak mission between September 1794 to the repose of the lay monk Father Herman in December 1837⁴⁷ can be viewed as a close-to-perfect observational study with the control factors of the imperial government in Saint Petersburg and the Holy Synod⁴⁸ in Moscow removed due to the vast distances and the presence of the Bering Strait. It was precisely in Alaska where the ugliness of unbridled secular lawlessness pitted the state and the Orthodox Church against each other, and the missionaries were no longer hindered by strict imperial control emanating from the Holy Synod. As monks were and continue to be primarily recruited for missionary endeavors, Orthodox monasticism speaks authoritatively for how the Orthodox Church interacts with non-Christian cultures and is the heart of the Church's beliefs.⁴⁹ The foundations set by the Kodiak Mission allowed Christianity to create a harmony of worldviews as the theology set by Saint Maximus was able to be implemented in fulfilling the native pre-Christian beliefs.

⁴⁶Znamenski, *Strategies for Survival*, 122.

⁴⁷Although church-state relations did improve long before Saint Herman reposed in 1837, more around the resignation of Baranov in 1818.

⁴⁸However, Metropolitan Gabriel was far from being a Russification advocate and neither was Catherine the Great. Both of them were eager to put Peter the Great's cultural policies in the past.

⁴⁹Znamenski, *Strategies for Survival*, 113. ; For further reference on the centrality and the absolute importance of Orthodox Christian monasticism in the Orthodox Church, read *Orthodox Monasticism as the Way of Life of Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs* by Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos.

Receiving native Alaskans into the Orthodox faith presented many unique challenges to the pastoral care of the mission. Alaska is a vast mountainous wilderness with sharp pointed peaks and thick woods that takes many weeks to travel across, allowing the only fast mode of travel to be by a *baidarka*, a small native canoe. This landscape presented problems to the mission not only in catechesis⁵⁰ but also in celebrating the Divine Liturgy and the Holy Eucharist, which only ordained priests could perform. This pastoral problem continued throughout the Russian presence in Alaska and continues to a lesser extent today.

Not only did the mission encounter difficulty serving the Holy Eucharist, but they also faced opposition from their fellow Russian countrymen. The Russian American Company (RAC) was under the leadership of Alexander Baranov, of whom a prominent member of the mission, Father Herman, noted, “Our simple people aptly describe such men with the word ‘unrestrained,’ and they oppose this concept directly to that of ‘enlightened.’ Such an ‘unrestrained’ person was, in many respects, what Baranov was.”⁵¹ Baranov had been placed in charge of running the RAC founder Gregory Shelikhov’s interests in Alaska in 1790 and later became the *de facto* governor of Alaska after the company charter monopoly was approved by Catherine the Great’s heir and successor, Tsar Paul I, in 1798. Although Shelikhov had provided for the missionaries entirely at his expense during their journey, and even wrote, “we have supplied the holy fathers with everything they need for the next three years, if they are frugal,”⁵² he lied, for no such supplies existed at Kodiak Island.

⁵⁰The apostolic Christian practice of educating a “catechumen” (an inquirer blessed to receive catechesis but not part of the Church proper) prior to baptism and illumination. This process can take anywhere from a month to three years depending on the priest in charge of the catechumen.

⁵¹Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in America*, 52.

⁵²Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 108.

Almost immediately, the missionaries faced opposition from secular authorities. Baranov was upset with having more mouths to feed on an already stringent supply of food, and the mission was dismayed with finding out that Shelikhov's promises of an idyllic community on Kodiak were far from the truth. The clergy quickly realized that they were at odds with company management. The company forced Sugpiaq and Unangan hunters at gunpoint to hunt for them, native women were violated, children abused at whim, and Baranov himself kept a native mistress while his wife was away in Siberia and encouraged his men to do the same. The Kodiak Aleuts essentially lived as serfs in bondage to the company; the only difference was that they could not be bought or sold.⁵³

With admirable self-control and righteous indignation, Archimandrite Joseph (Bolotov) wrote to Shelikhov eight months after landing in May 1795, "Since my arrival at this harbor I have seen nothing done to carry out your good intentions. My own pleasure is that so many Americans⁵⁴ are coming from everywhere to be baptized, but the Russians not only make no effort to encourage them, but use every means to discourage them. The reason for this is that their depraved lives become evident if compared to the good conduct of the Americans."⁵⁵ Baranov replied to these accusations that same month as though he had read Archimandrite Joseph's letter, not a far stretch considering all mail correspondence was carried aboard company ships. While admitting to having a native mistress, he rebuked charges of drunkenness and

⁵³Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 22.

⁵⁴Native Alaskans

⁵⁵Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 109-110. ; Archimandrite Joseph in the same letter took issue with the fact that many Creole children were being sent off to Russia for education, preferring to have them educated in Alaska by expanding the local school system. He also related an example of Baranov's cruelty on Pascha Day (Easter), "They marched one serf through a gauntlet of pummeling whalebones, killing him" (Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 32).

astoundingly stated that “as for the clergy, I feel it my duty to see to their well-being and to obey their will.”⁵⁶ However, Shelikhov died in mysterious circumstances a month later that year, leaving Baranov, nicknamed the “wild ram,”⁵⁷ in solid control of the company for the next twenty-three years.

Relations continued to worsen—since Archimandrite Joseph refused to accept that exploitation, immorality, or terror could ever serve the national interest—to the point that the bishopric of Irkutsk summoned him to Russia in the spring of 1798 to deliver a testimony to the increasing number and seriousness of charges leveled against Baranov and the RAC employees.⁵⁸ Archimandrite Joseph wrote ominously, “Because a hierarch located there, in the event that they⁵⁹ kill priests, could ordain others from among the very same natives, of whom many have already learned both the Russian language and Holy Scripture and therefore could more quickly and convincingly explain it to their compatriots in their own tongue and attract them to Holy Baptism.”⁶⁰ Hieromonk Macarius had already gone to Irkutsk with several *toens* of Unalaska Island in the summer of 1796 on his initiative to complain about the Golikov-

⁵⁶Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 111.

⁵⁷“Baran” means ram

⁵⁸Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 111.

⁵⁹Archimandrite Joseph meant the employees of the Russian American Company since Baranov made veiled threats against members of the Kodiak Mission, in particular towards both Archimandrite Joseph and Father Herman.

⁶⁰Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 45.

Shelikhov Company frontman Basil Merkul'ev's treatment of the natives,⁶¹ but he was reprimanded for leaving his post without permission.⁶²

Archimandrite Joseph left Father Herman in charge of the mission trusting in his humility, wisdom, and leadership ability instead of the other senior priests on Kodiak Island. Upon learning of the egregious treatment of the natives on Kodiak and elsewhere, Archimandrite Joseph was consecrated as a bishop at Irkutsk and vested with moral and political influence that far surpassed Baranov's. Returning in 1799 to begin his episcopal ministry in Kodiak with Hieromonk Macarius, Hieromonk Stephen,⁶³ several married priests and their families, and an entourage of sextons and choristers, the *Phoenix* that Bishop Joseph was sailing on sank in a storm with all hands lost.⁶⁴

This was the low point of the Russian Orthodox mission in Alaska during this period as all communication ceased from the years 1798 to 1802, and constant shipwrecks plagued the Bering Sea crossing. The Holy Synod in Moscow did not learn of Bishop Joseph's death until 1803, and the blow dealt to the mission was so severe that the vicariate established for Bishop Joseph was abolished in 1811 since no bishop occupied the post. Baranov used this time to exercise even tighter control over the mission's activities, placing the rest of the monks under strict house arrest from January 1801 to September 1802 over a dispute among the natives to take

⁶¹Macarius stated in his report that there were attempts on his life made by associates of Merkul'ev.

⁶²Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 44.

⁶³The hierodeacon of the original 1794 mission; he was ordained a priest at Irkutsk alongside Bishop Joseph.

⁶⁴Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 45.

the oath to the Tsar.⁶⁵ According to the official report made by Hieromonk Gideon, once the missionaries were under control, the company was free to commit many acts of violence towards the natives and harassed the monks, saying “God is high and the Tsar is far away—all is fine as long as our boss is alive and well!”⁶⁶

Hieromonk Gideon was later sent to Kodiak Island by the Holy Synod to examine the state of affairs in 1804, arriving in 1805 and staying for two years. Empowered to inspect and reorganize church affairs, Gideon wrote to Baranov in May 1807 with polite displeasure,⁶⁷

...the attitude of the Russians living here has, up to now, been based on rules incompatible with humanity. Their depraved minds result from their having gone to America to grow rich and only then to return to fritter away in a few days what they have earned from many years of other people’s sweat and toil. Are such people going to respect their neighbors? They have given up family life altogether, and have no good examples to follow. Therefore the poor Americans are, to the shame of the Russians, sacrificed to their immorality.⁶⁸

Even Baranov had to be respectful to him because he had direct access to the Tsar, resulting in Baranov requesting a separate investigation from Count Nicholas Rezanov to “corroborate” Gideon’s inspection.⁶⁹ In reality, Rezanov was personally connected to the company and only paid lip service to Gideon’s concerns, reporting to the company board of directors after Gideon’s departure for Russia in 1807 that “these monks did not comprehend the

⁶⁵Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 57. ; They were also not allowed to attend Holy Resurrection Church that the monks had completed in 1796 (Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 44).

⁶⁶Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 58.

⁶⁷Gideon also reported that some of the native women committed infanticide because of how cruel the Russian rule was.

⁶⁸Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 117.

⁶⁹Count Nicholas Rezanov was the son-in-law of Shelikhov (Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 59).

interests of the state and the company.”⁷⁰ As a result of Rezanov’s concurrent report siding entirely with Baranov, Gideon’s report to the state was neutralized, and there was no further action taken.

The state of the natives, the mission, and the company continued to deteriorate as no new priests or monks were sent to Alaska besides a priest to Sitka Island in 1816 and the visit of Hieromonk Gideon. A German researcher, G. I. Langsdorf, visited Russian America in the years 1805-1806 and observed that the old age of Baranov,⁷¹ “unconscionable” behavior of company employees and “terrible management,” size of the settlement and the “enormity of the distance between them and the main office in St. Petersburg,” the “inadequacy of necessary supervision and justice” were the main reasons for such a scale of mistreatment of which it was “impossible for one man—even the most honest of men—to fight.”⁷² Intriguingly, Langsdorf noted that he knew that his observations were absurd, but stated that everything he testified of was true.

Father Herman’s efforts eventually corrected the RAC’s abhorrent behavior to the natives and the missionaries. From the very beginning, Father Herman as a simple lay monk, stood up for the interests of the native Alaskans that he cared for, writing extensively to Russia, teaching native children, and caring for orphans.⁷³ Father Herman left Kodiak Island at an unknown time

⁷⁰Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 118.

⁷¹Baranov was 60 in 1806.

⁷²Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 64. ; Interestingly, Father Herman was that one man active in battling the numerous company excesses to the best of his abilities.

⁷³Father Herman wrote to his Valaam friend, Hegumen Nazarius, on May 22nd, 1795, “If only, dear father, there were some kind of aid from the Tsar, then a great amount of good could be accomplished, for it is very awkward to mix the local people with the merchants, because they are only concerned about wealth and greatly offend the poor Americans, about which I wrote more extensively to His Grace” (Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 37). ; Father Herman wrote, “If only there were no insults to the Americans from the company, then everything would be quite cheery” (Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 38).

from 1811 to 1817 for an unknown reason, although it is fair to consider that company officials constantly badgered him and the turmoil of Kodiak no longer suited an aging monk.⁷⁴ Despite Father Herman's withdrawal to his self-styled "New Valaam" (nearby Spruce Island), he took under his care many orphans and built a small school in which he instructed local native children in reading, writing, and the Holy Scriptures.⁷⁵ He continued to be sought out by many Aleuts for spiritual instruction and relief from the company, and he often personally visited the new RAC manager Simon Yanovsky from 1818 to 1821 to instruct him on enlightened Christian principles of governance.⁷⁶ Interestingly, in his letters, he reports more on the state of the mission and the oppression of the natives than the more standard monastic discourse on spirituality.⁷⁷

When the imperial government had received enough complaints to justify another inquiry, Baranov resigned in disgrace in January 1818 and was sent to Russia to await trial and harsh punishment. The imperial inspector Captain Basil Golovnin based a large number of his report's findings on Father Herman's testimonies and produced significant repercussions on the state's relations with the RAC.⁷⁸ However, Father Herman never felt any personal acrimony

⁷⁴Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 66.

⁷⁵Instruction of children is valued very highly in Orthodoxy, as Saint John Chrysostom (one of the Church's Three Holy Hierarchs) said, "I put the person who can mold the soul of a child higher than a sculptor, higher than any artist."

⁷⁶Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 67. ; It is noteworthy that despite Yanovsky declaring himself to be a liberal thinker and anticlericalist before he met Father Herman, he became a Great Schema monk late in his life and all of his children entered monasteries as well. He was the first to write a biography of Father Herman and one of his daughters, a nun, produced the first drawing of Father Herman from Simon's memory.

⁷⁷Father Herman wrote in a letter dated December 28th, 1818, "In all my life here, from my own Russians I have seen more of scorn and reproach and mockery, to which I have already become accustomed, and from such custom I think that in actual fact my lowliness is such" (Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, *Little Russian Philokalia: Saint Herman* (AK: St. Herman Press, 1989) 57).

⁷⁸Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 123.

towards Baranov and forgave him despite everything he had done to the natives and the mission.⁷⁹ He reposed in peace among his adopted orphans as the last member of the Kodiak mission on December 25, 1837. The personal historian of Baranov, K. T. Khlebnikov wrote of Father Herman, “He would become heatedly involved for the rights of the local natives (which were being violated by the agitation, crudeness and immorality of the explorers and the authorities), and thereby became the victim of many malicious animosities.”⁸⁰ Father Herman continued to be deeply loved by the Aleuts and was later canonized as a saint at their insistence in 1970.

The Native Response and Subsequent Harmonizing of Cultures and Beliefs

Despite contention and at times outright violence between the Kodiak mission and the RAC, the natives of Kodiak by all accounts seem to have flocked to the missionaries without any coercion, in fact, although the company actively discouraged such movements. Archimandrite Joseph wrote in May 1795 to the bishopric in Irkutsk, “We live comfortably, they love us and we them, they are a kind people, but poor. They take baptism so much to heart that they smash and burn all the magic charms given them by the shamans.”⁸¹ Oleksa asserts that the monks of the Kodiak mission were able to build a bond of solidarity with the Sugpiaq natives of Kodiak

⁷⁹Writing to Baranov after a failed attempt was made on Baranov’s life, Father Herman said, “The Father of compassions and God Almighty, preserving the world, also preserves your life and well-being; to Him alone should be given glory and thanksgivings unto the ages.” (Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 82).

⁸⁰Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, *Little Russian Philokalia: Saint Herman* (AK: St. Herman Press, 1989) 8.

⁸¹Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 42.

through their sympathetic study of traditional religious beliefs and their defense of the natives by open opposition to Baranov's exploitation.⁸²

Father Herman in writing to his friend Hegumen⁸³ Nazarius in Valaam agreed with this rapid expansion of the Orthodox faith, stating that, "The Americans come very eagerly to be baptized, just under 7,000 have taken the faith."⁸⁴ In the same letter, he related the story of listening to the two hieromonks on the mission, Father Macarius and Father Juvenaly, having an amusing argument over how they were to divide up the Alaskan lands in their missionary fervor, writing, "Hieromonks Father Macarius and Father Juvenaly are always so fervent, almost like madmen wanting to rush off in all directions."⁸⁵ Oleksa confirms the number of 7,000 and Richard Pierce says up to twelve thousand native Alaskans in total were baptized by the mission in the first two years of the mission.⁸⁶ However, as Father John Veniaminov sadly recounted, "The further spread of Christianity amongst the Americans, of whom there were far greater numbers, was almost entirely brought to a halt by the martyr-like death of Father Juvenaly."⁸⁷

Despite the loss of Father Juvenaly and later Bishop Joseph, Hieromonk Macarius, and Hieromonk Stephen in the *Phoenix*, and the repression by Baranov after 1801, the monks under Father Herman persevered, learning to grow vegetables such as potatoes, radishes, and turnips.⁸⁸

⁸²Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 113.

⁸³A traditional Greek name for an Orthodox head of a monastery.

⁸⁴Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 43.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 44.

⁸⁶Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 113. ; Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 46.

⁸⁷Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 46.

⁸⁸Subsequent years proved that rutabaga, beets, garlic, and barley could be grown on Kodiak, the means of which were readily taught to the native populace by the monks.

They continued to instruct natives in the faith and agriculture ignoring the RAC's restriction of all native visits. Father Herman wrote, "With the surplus remaining from our labors we helped poor locals and, by having a kind approach as is required of proselytizers, we created a good opinion of us in the minds of the Americans."⁸⁹ Robert A. Pierce claims this effort potentially relieved the seriousness of famines when there was an absence of fish and other sea animals that made up the staple of the native diet, but this is indeed an area of statistical study that could be investigated into further.⁹⁰

Stopping at Unalaska Island on his way to Russia in July 1807, Hieromonk Gideon noted that the Aleuts "know and reverently observe all Church feasts, listen to the instructions impressed upon them with extraordinary desire and love; and fulfill these instructions in deed."⁹¹ Nearby, the Aleuts under the direction of a local *toen* named Ivan Glotov built a chapel of Saint Nicholas on the neighboring island of Umnak. He led the morning prayers and read the Hours on Sundays and feast days himself.⁹² From the diary of Ferdinand von Wrangell,⁹³ the governor of Russian Alaska in 1835, noted a conversation with Father Herman as he reported, "You see, my diocese is not very large, only a few hundred people. Fetishism⁹⁴ disappeared from this region thirty years ago. I have seen many who have changed to a better life. I am happy now to wed the

⁸⁹Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 44.

⁹⁰Pierce, *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in Alaska*, 61.

⁹¹Korsun and Black, *Herman: A Wilderness Saint*, 75.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Admiral Ferdinand P. von Wrangell was notably himself a Lutheran, but he and his wife (who even more so) indicate a deep respect for the sanctity and purity of Saint Herman in their personal diaries.

⁹⁴The old name for shamanism.

children I once baptized. Oh, if only we could have a chapel and a bell!”⁹⁵ This wish von Wrangell fulfilled.

It should also be noted here that Father Herman carried with him from Russia to the end of his life the Russian version of the *Philokalia*, called the *Dobrotolublye*.⁹⁶ It is an anthology of spiritual writings including a core of Saint Maximus’ work and is so crucial to constituting the foundation of Orthodox spirituality that it has been called having “exercised an influence far greater than that of any book other than the Bible in the recent history of the Orthodox Church.”⁹⁷ Any further investigation into the spiritual connection between the native shamanism Father Herman encountered and his response to it should undoubtedly begin at the *Philokalia*.⁹⁸

Aside from the first missionaries in 1794, no new priests or monks were sent to Alaska besides a priest to Sitka Island in 1816 and the visit of Hieromonk Gideon in 1805. There are no official reasons stated as to why, but it is most likely because the Kodiak mission had entirely alienated the RAC officials who lost the appetite for more missionaries, in addition to the fact that service in Alaska was voluntary. Barbara Smith claims that the renegotiated Charter of 1821 was what reinvigorated the missionary zeal of 1794, with the imperial government requiring the RAC to provide more company resources for Orthodox evangelists and commissioning the

⁹⁵Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, *Little Russian Philokalia*, 66.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 189.

⁹⁷*The Philokalia The Complete Text Volume One*, compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, translated and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1983) back cover.

⁹⁸From the book’s description: “The *Philokalia* is a collection of texts written between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries by spiritual masters of the Orthodox Christian tradition. It is concerned with themes of universal importance: how man may develop his inner powers and awake from illusion; how he may overcome fragmentation and achieve spiritual wholeness; how he may attain the life of contemplative stillness and union with God.” The influence of this book is also very prevalent in famous Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works.

clergy to keep oversight over company actions.⁹⁹ The arrival of Archpriest John Veniaminov in 1823 marks a turning point in Orthodox Alaska history as a combination of renewed missionary zeal and conciliatory church-state relations built on and expanded the legacy of the 1794 Kodiak mission. Indeed, as Kan points out, Veniaminov as bishop of Alaska was more diplomatic with the RAC and sought a harmony of church-state relations towards the natives, with the Church acting as a necessary check on unruly local trade post managers.¹⁰⁰ This, however, in no way means that the Church ignored company excesses as the Church had a decisive hand in changing company philosophy through the Valaam monks' self-sacrificial protection of the native Alaskans.

Much has been written about Bishop Innocent (Veniaminov)¹⁰¹ and his evangelism and ethnological studies, all of which are extremely important and deserve more mention and investigation. However, what is essential to the focus of this paper is his view on Christianization being somehow inclusive with westernization. Unlike the western missionaries, Veniaminov—and likewise Orthodoxy as a whole—did not believe that Christianity had to arrive with an imposition of western culture, and the previous experience of the Kodiak mission expresses this

⁹⁹Barbara S. Smith, *Russian Orthodoxy in Alaska*, (Anchorage: Van Cleve Printing, 1980) 5. ; Paragraph 37 of the 1821 Charter reads, “In addition to the responsibilities with which the Company is charged by this decree, it has the duty of maintaining a sufficient number of priests and church personnel in the Colonies. Cathedrals or appropriate places for church services should be established where there is a substantial number of inhabitants. These buildings should be maintained in proper condition. Priests should receive all that which is necessary for a decent existence. They should always receive assistance from the local authorities in fulfilling their responsibilities. All this should be done so that all employees of the Company can carry out their responsibilities according to God’s Commandments and receive in time of need that aid and support which they should expect from the Church clergy” (*The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (1972): 45).

¹⁰⁰Sergei Kan, “Russian Orthodox Missionaries at Home and Abroad: The Case of Siberian and Alaskan Indigenous Peoples” in *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia*, edited by Robert P. Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) 189.

¹⁰¹John Veniaminov took monastic vows after the death of his wife in 1840 and took the monastic name of “Innokentii” or Innocent.

belief in practice. Like most conservative Russian thinkers of his time, Veniaminov believed that the 1840 revolutions in western Europe were a sign of moral decay that stemmed from the Enlightenment. Contrasting the western Europeans with his beloved Aleut peoples, Veniaminov wrote, “The more I become acquainted with the savages, the more I become convinced that, as far as morality is concerned, the so-called wild ones [*dikie*] are much better than many of the so-called enlightened ones. Does this mean that we, with our enlightenment, are moving away from, rather than approaching perfection?”¹⁰²

Kan suggests that Veniaminov combined Orthodox theology with Enlightenment rationalism and this was a significant factor in his evangelical approach to the native Alaskans by stressing their humanity.¹⁰³ Accepting the syncretism model, Znamenski concludes that since native shamanism readily looked for spiritual medicine, it sought to accept innovations from other sources to aid this task, and Christianity represented one of these sources.¹⁰⁴ Both of these claims are erroneous and untenable when examining Saint Maximus’ practical theology of cosmology, which was always present and prevalent in all Orthodox missions despite the distortions of Peter the Great. Both of these scholars betray a superficial understanding of the inner “mechanics” of how Orthodox theology interconnects with her missiology, and they instead attribute exterior factors as somehow influencing the very core of how Orthodox missionaries approached native cultures.

¹⁰²Sergei Kan, “Russian Orthodox Missionaries at Home and Abroad”, 188.

¹⁰³Ibid., 185.

¹⁰⁴Znamenski, *Strategies for Survival*, 93.

The Western Clash in the Post-1867 Period

Father Veniaminov in a report to the Holy Synod in 1839 recounted the difficulties of church organization in Alaska, blaming the lack of priests for continued paganism among the tribes, stating that “the Aleuts lack faith because they know little of Christianity, not because they are stubborn or hostile,” noting the exception were those instructed by Father Herman.¹⁰⁵ In 1870, the journal entries of an American lieutenant based on Kodiak, named Eli Huggins, expressed a substantial improvement, writing that “the Creoles¹⁰⁶ of Alaska are the most devout people at church I have ever seen,” and goes on to describe the centrality of Orthodox culture in the Indigenous landscape.¹⁰⁷

American rule of Alaska came with western missionaries, particularly Protestant missionaries that were officially supported and funded by the American government. Sheldon Jackson, a Presbyterian minister, spearheaded the efforts of bringing western Christianity to the native Alaskans, writing, “When in 1867 this vast territory, with a population of from 30,000 to 50,000 souls, was turned over to the United States, the call of God’s Providence came to the American church to enter in and possess the land for Christ. And in response to that call it was to be expected that the churches of the United States, with their purer religion and greater

¹⁰⁵Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 159. ; Interestingly, Baranov’s personal historian K. T. Klebnikhov dismissed Father Herman’s preaching as useless and making no impact on the natives.

¹⁰⁶It should be noted that Creoles were never understood as a separate hierarchical class in Russia or as second-class citizens considering that the vast majority of RAC employees and leaders were Creole. Statistics indicating the decline of the Aleut population after 1820 are potentially misleading as the Creole population increased dramatically at the same. The native Alaskans did not die out, they became Creole after persistent intermarriage. After the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, the Creole designation no longer existed and in fact reversed them to native status, which to the American federal government was effectively second-class citizenship (Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 146-150).

¹⁰⁷Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 161-162.

consecration, would send in more efficient agencies than Russia had done.”¹⁰⁸ Later becoming the first General Agent of Education in the Alaska Territory,¹⁰⁹ Jackson along with former Presbyterian minister Governor John Green Brady¹¹⁰ had a direct influence on government policy in Alaska: establishing Protestantism in Alaska and the replacement of all native languages with English.¹¹¹ Reverend S. Hall Young wrote of his goals, “We should let the old tongues with their superstitions and sin die—the sooner the better—and replace these languages with that of Christian civilization, and compel the Natives in our schools to speak English and English only.”¹¹² Although the Treaty of Cessions in Article II and III guaranteed the right of the Orthodox Church to continue holding church lands and opened citizenship to Russians and “civilized natives,”¹¹³ these articles were violated early and often as native tribal regions were divided between western Christian denominations without consideration for the pre-existing Orthodox Church.

¹⁰⁸Sheldon Jackson, *Alaska and Missions on the North Pacific Coast* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1880) 129.

¹⁰⁹Jackson served in this capacity from 1885 to 1907, having directly influenced Alaskan education policy for 22 consecutive years.

¹¹⁰Brady served as Governor from July 1897 to March 1906.

¹¹¹Jackson accomplished this by transforming the entire linguistic structure of education to purely English, seeing the abolition of the last class in Aleut in 1912.

¹¹²Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 171. ; Jackson also wrote to newly hired teachers (he personally oversaw the process of hiring Protestant ministers and like-minded evangelists for boarding school positions), “It is the purpose of the government in establishing schools in Alaska to train up English speaking American citizens. You will therefore teach in English and give special prominence to instruction in the English language.... [Y]our teaching should be pervaded by the spirit of the Bible” (Richard Dauenhauer, 1982, “Two missions to Alaska” *Pacific Historian* 26 no. 1, 29-41).

¹¹³The American definition of natives conformed to western standards. Not only were Creoles not included under this category and reverted to second-class citizenship under American rule, the well-educated Creoles of Alaska rejected conformity to western values and tried to hold fast to their traditions.

The native Alaskans found themselves losing a cultural and religious liberty battle against the federal government as bilingual education was shut down¹¹⁴ (a right that was not affirmed by the United States until 1974 in *Lau vs. Nichols*),¹¹⁵ native children were taken from their villages and forced into boarding schools, and Protestant missionaries consistently ignoring Orthodox baptism and religious preferences of native Alaskans.¹¹⁶ Recounts of conflicts between Orthodox clergy and state-sponsored Protestant boarding schools are well documented in journals such as the *Russian Orthodox American Messenger* as the outnumbered and outfunded Orthodox clergy spoke out against state excesses towards the natives.¹¹⁷ These actions are not merely a fluke attributed to over-zealous missionaries, as Professor Robert F. Berkhofer observed that Protestant missionaries throughout North America “preached the exclusiveness of Christianity” by demanding a total cultural change and Michael C. Coleman also expresses that the rigid individualism espoused by Presbyterian clerics alienated tightly-knit traditional Indigenous cultures across the board.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴Ivanov, *The Russian Orthodox Church of Alaska*, 25.

¹¹⁵Even though Russian missionaries had already been teaching bilingual education by at least Hieromonk Gideon’s inspection in 1806. This is not counting the Russian *promyshlenniki* who for decades prior to the Kodiak Mission married into native tribes and raised their Creole children in both native and Russian cultures.

¹¹⁶Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 177. ; At first, western education was thought of by the native Alaskans to be of the highest standard, but quickly realized with the return of their children that they were no longer the same people that had left the village and they had become very disassociated with their traditions. Because of the unique interconnectedness of traditional indigenous cultures, this was akin to a spiritual death and loss in the community. Contrast this with the Creoles who were sent to Russia and came back as chieftains of their clans.

¹¹⁷American missionaries and federal officials (at times these divisions were blurred as seen by the case of Sheldon Jackson in a prior footnote) alleged that Orthodox schools refused to teach English as an opposition to assimilationist policies, when in fact Orthodox schools had been teaching English since Bishop Paul (Popov) introduced it in 1871. In fact, the Sitka Island school was offering English since 1845 (Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 177).

¹¹⁸Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *Salvation and the Savage. An Analysis of Protestant Missions and the American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (New York: Atheneum, 1972) 112. ; Michael Coleman, *Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes Toward American Indians, 1837-1893* (London: University Press of Mississippi, 1985) 81-82.

Because of Protestant sectarianism and its support by the state,¹¹⁹ the Orthodox found themselves once again oppressed not unlike the conditions of the Kodiak missionaries.¹²⁰ Paradoxically, native Alaskans who had resisted Orthodox evangelism under the RAC now embraced Orthodoxy as western sectarianism threatened their culture, the most prominent example being the Tlingit tribes on Sitka Island.¹²¹ After an Orthodox clergy/native Alaskan letter of protest was sent to Washington D.C. by Bishop Nicholas (Ziorov) in 1897, Jackson responded angrily in 1899 claiming that the “days of the Orthodox Church are numbered” and that “twenty-five years from now, there will not be any Orthodox church members left in Alaska.”¹²² There are today over 50,000 Orthodox Christians in Alaska with the vast majority of the laity and clergy being of native Alaskan descent, and continue to be the largest single native-populated Christian church in Alaska.

Epilogue

In an age where the cultural plight and economic issues of the Indigenous native cultures of the Americas are gaining prominence and rightfully so, it is important to consider the striking

¹¹⁹For further reference on the departure of western natural theology and cosmology from Saint Maximus’ vision, read Father Alexander Schmemmen’s chapter “Sacrament and Symbol” in *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (St. Vladimir’s Press, 2004), 135-153.

¹²⁰An editorial in a 1971 issue of the Orthodox journal, *Orthodox Alaska*, addressed the continuing 100-year clash of Protestant sectarianism with native Alaskan culture, “The Orthodox Church believes that Christianity is not a religion which demands the destruction of all cultural forms and heritages so that her believers might be molded into a common pattern (In any case—what pattern would we choose?) The Church does believe, however, that true Christianity demands that in the heart of the believer all other gods must be set aside and that Jesus Christ is confessed as Lord and Savior. The Church believes that it is perfectly possible for that faith to be expressed in a multitude of cultural preferences—in fact, she prefers it.... Orthodoxy in its missionary endeavors throughout the centuries, has consistently tried to preserve among its converts their unique cultural and linguistic heritages. We have not always succeeded. We still remain firm, however, in our conviction that it is possible for a great many cultural forms to become expressions of our Christian life and faith” (Smith, *Russian Orthodoxy in Alaska*, 15-16).

¹²¹Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 180-181.

¹²²Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 182.

difference of the historical and continuing Orthodox Church's role in interacting with these ancient and sophisticated cultures. Because of western ethnocentric historiographies' focus on linguistic and ethnographic accomplishments of Orthodox missionaries (particularly John Veniaminov), they have inadequately dealt with the Orthodox message to the native peoples of Alaska. They have "missed the boat" on why or how such accomplishments came to be. When they encountered such points of contact between Orthodox and native beliefs, they have either skipped it or failed to understand the context of the beliefs on both sides. The cosmological dimension of these encounters is particularly misunderstood and is a scholarly tragedy considering how central it is to these encounters.

The failure to understand cosmology explains the western view present in the sectarianism of Protestant missionaries for failing to understand native beliefs and their culture, preferring to dismiss it as backward and barbarian, thinking it necessary to wipe the slate clean in order to convert native cultures to Christianity properly. The Russian monastics as authoritative spokesmen for Orthodox Christianity lovingly studied the Indigenous cultures and their beliefs and effectively communicated a comprehensive cosmological vision revealed in Christ that fulfilled a pre-existing native belief system. Therefore, Orthodox Christianity should be considered on its own terms when analyzing the effects of Christian mission on native cultures and not merely lumped in with the dissimilar missiology approaches of the west.

The Russian Orthodox mission in Alaska and its ability to create a harmony of ancient Christianity and ancient tribal traditions through a common cosmology cannot be adequately explained by the cultural presence of the Russians, material, professional, or financial resources, or a vague definition of religious syncretism. Wherever native traditions and Orthodox attitudes have overlapped, they have reinforced each other. The continuing fidelity of native Alaskans to

Orthodoxy means something more profound in the consciousness of Indigenous culture, the basis of which derives from Saint Maximus's cosmic dimension of the Orthodox worldview. These are the foundations on which religious syncretism or cultural supplantation can be ruled out as valid explanations for Orthodox Christian missiology, and instead surfaces a genuine and tangible religio-cultural harmony of a uniquely Indigenous faith the native Alaskans can call their own.



Figure 1: A Russian religious painting of what the Blessing of the Great Waters may look like.



Figure 2: A photograph of a Russian Orthodox priest dropping the Cross for the purpose of asking God to sanctify the waters and, by extension, all life.

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Addendum

Saint Maximus and His Relation to Cosmology

Saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662) was a brilliant 7th century monk in the Eastern Roman Empire who wrote on cosmology, spiritual contemplation, and divine love. Lars Thunberg describes Saint Maximus' theology as "a spiritual vision of the cosmos, of human vision within that cosmos, and therefore of the economy of salvation, the salvific interplay between the human and the divine."¹²³ To Maximus, salvation is much more encompassing than the more restricted western view of a Divine undoing of man's mistake—rescuing him from sin and death—instead, he points towards the vast cosmological Divine plan, *logos*, for mankind. Jesus Christ as the Son of God would become incarnate as a part of His own creation in order to call man, being the first among creation, to bring the cosmos into a divine union in the life of the Trinity.¹²⁴ Therefore, man's occupation is similar to that of a "middle" position, hedging the division between the material world (earth) and the spiritual world (the heavens).¹²⁵ This is integral to the Orthodox view of salvation and deification as being inclusive and interconnects

¹²³Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos: the Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1985) 31.

¹²⁴This ultimate aim of man's existence in God according to the Logos is expressed by Saint Maximus, "[T]hat whole people might participate in the whole God (theos holos holois metekhomenos), and that in the same way in which the soul and in body are united, God should become partakable of by the soul, and, by the soul's intermediary, by the body, immortality; and finally, that the whole man should become God, deified by the grace of God become man, becoming whole man, soul and body, by nature, a becoming whole God, would and body, by grace" (John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Corpus Publications, 1969) 109).

¹²⁵"This is the reason why man was the last to make his entrance among beings... a natural link (syndesmos tis physicos) between the extremities of creation... the great mystery of the divine plan (logos)" (Ibid., 106).

with theosis¹²⁶ and hesychasm,¹²⁷ and the original Christian missiology in converting cultures such as the classical Hellenism of the Roman world and subsequently the native Alaskans.¹²⁸

Saint Maximus' ideas were largely expounded in the *Ambigua*, a work written in response to Saint Gregory's writings (329-390), the archbishop of Constantinople in the 4th century, and in response to the highly influential but incorrectly conceived Platonic beliefs constructed by Origen (184-253). By arranging a theology that was cohesive and broad, yet unsystematized in comparison to later western dialectical reasoning, Saint Maximus was able to deploy refutations of Origen's system and the contemporary heresy of monothelism¹²⁹ by clarifying the "ambiguities" of Saint Gregory the Theologian's works in the patristic tradition. It is impossible to examine subsequent Orthodox history without contextualizing it in Maximus' theanthropic cosmology found in the *Ambigua*.¹³⁰

¹²⁶For Orthodox Christians, this means a life-long process of "divinization" or "deification" in the struggle for likeness in Jesus Christ as he is seen in the Gospels, becoming free of *hamartía* (missing the mark) and being united with God in holiness and sanctity. This is drawn from 2 Peter 1:4 and expressed by Saint Athanasius the Great (296-373): "The Son of God became man, that we might become god." This is very different from a rationalist western theology of legal burden and atonement.

¹²⁷Literally meaning "inner stillness," it is the Orthodox spiritual practice of contemplative inner prayer used to aid in the process of theosis by achieving unceasing prayer of the nous (center of one's being), drawn from Luke 5:16, 11:1, 18:1, etc., and his teacher Saint Paul in his Epistles, 1 Thess. 5:17, Eph. 6:18, etc. More examples are found in the *Philokalia*.

¹²⁸For an exhaustive review of Orthodox Christian mystical theology (the Orthodox believe that theology is inseparable from experiential belief), refer to Vladimir Lossky's "The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church" or Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev's "Vol. II Orthodox Christianity Doctrine and Teaching of the Orthodox Church".

¹²⁹Monothelism, meaning "one will," was a Christological development of the Monophysite heresy (believing that Christ had one nature; condemned by the Council of Chalcedon) that asserted Christ had one will.

¹³⁰Some scholars contend that since the writings of Origen were condemned at the 5th Ecumenical Council (553), the supporters of Origen turned to Saint Gregory's writings, claiming to find in them the very positions Origen supported. However, as Nicholas Constatas asserts, there is very little evidence to substantiate such claims of a "revived Origenism" in the 7th century. The reality is more likely that Justinian the Great's edicts condemning Origenism in the past century merely addressed superficial aspects of Origen's heretical works, to which Maximus felt compelled to reach back into Origen's ruined framework and overhaul it on sound philosophical and theological principles.

Although the Ambigua concerns the more difficult and challenging parts of Saint Gregory's writings, hence "ambiguities," Maximus always refers to well-established authorities in patristic tradition styled as the Church Fathers that guided and protected the growth and development of the early Christian Church that is rooted in the first apostles under the Holy Apostles of Jesus Christ. This may sound strange and perhaps even sacrilegious to the modern reader, but to do so would be to miss the point of the Orthodox tradition. The Church Fathers were reading each other's material, just as philosophy students today read Aristotle, Plato, and then Kant and DeCartes. Saint Maximus traces back his cosmology to the Apostolic Christology of Saint Paul and synthesizes the work of other recognized patristic authorities such as Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint Irenaeus.

Origen created a theological framework that perceives things in motion being chaotic and therefore evil in its post-Fall state. A return to static spiritual harmony is ideal in Origen's ideas. Maximus completely turns Origen's framework around on its head, reversing the movement of things back towards God, as it is God Himself who put all things into motion. Everything God creates is according to His divine plan or *Logos*, and each being, animate *and* inanimate, carries within itself the divine plan, or *logoi*. However, Maximus also affirms that man has free will,¹³¹ but in the Fall misused his natural will to subvert his true and infinite movement towards God.¹³²

¹³¹In Maximus' *Dialogue with Pyrrhus*, "If man is the image of the divine nature and if the divine nature is free (autexousios), so is the image" (Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 104).

¹³²Maximus writes on fallen man's condition, "Today man in his actions is possessed by the irrational imagination of the passions, deceived by concupiscence, or preoccupied either by the contrivances of science because of his needs, or by the desire to learn the principles of nature according to its laws. None of these compulsions existed for man originally, since he was above everything. For thus man must have been in the beginning: in no way distracted by what was beneath him or around him or near him, and desiring perfection in nothing except irresistible movement, with all the strength of love towards the One who was above him, i.e., God" (Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 105).

God loves the whole cosmos, so the sending of His Son is a “recapitulation,”¹³³ bringing back creation’s movement away from God and re-establishing the natural harmony of creation that is the basis of spiritual life.¹³⁴

Father Michael Oleksa concludes on the ensuing Orthodox “positive” view towards native cultures containing parts of the *logoi* in their cosmology:

This theology in effect laid the foundations for the positive view which Orthodox missions generally have had of traditional societies in central and eastern Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries, and across central Asia and into eastern Siberia and Alaska over the next eight hundred years. Orthodox evangelists felt no obligation to attack all the pre-contact religious beliefs of shamanistic tribes, for they could perceive in them some of the positive appreciation of the cosmos that is central to Saint Maximus’ theology. They could affirm that the spiritual realities these societies worshipped were indeed “*logoi*,” related to the Divine *Logos*, whose personal existence these societies had simply never imagined. The missionary could announce the revelation of God in Christ as truly “Good News,” without completely denigrating the religious beliefs or pagan practices the tribe had traditionally maintained. Maximus’ positive view of humanity as potentially divine, with every individual person moving toward unity-in-love according to the divine plan, yet each distinct and unique, and created to be eternally so, brought a greater appreciation for cultural and personal diversity to the Eastern Church.¹³⁵

¹³³Saint Maximus uses the same concept of anakephaliosis formed by Saint Irenaeus in his refutations against the Gnostics five centuries earlier. ; Recapitulation on Christ’s part means assuming the entirety of man as he was before the Fall with the virginity of Adam expressed in the Virgin Birth of Christ as one example, hence one of the many reasons why the Orthodox Church calls Christ the “Second Adam.” By using the recapitulation of human nature in Christ, Maximus is able to refute monothelism as this implies that the incarnate Word assumed human energy and restored it according to the divine plan, thus Christ assuming two wills that are coequal. Patristic tradition prior to Maximus already heavily leaned in favor of this with St. Athanasius stating for example, “He manifests here two wills (*dyo thelemata*): the human will, which belongs to the flesh; and the divine will, which belongs to God” (Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 111).

¹³⁴Maximus writes on this spiritual life within the Church, “The mind acts according to nature when it keeps the passions in submission, when it studies the *logoi* of beings, and remains near God.... Do you want to be righteous? Give to each part which constitutes you what it deserves—I mean your soul, and your body.... To the reasonable part of the soul, give readings and contemplations and prayer, to the irascible part, spiritual love, and adversary of hatred; to the concupiscible part, chastity and temperance; to the flesh, food and clothing, which alone are indispensable” (Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 106).

¹³⁵Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska*, 61.

However, to western theologians the distinction between the essence/energies of God is distorted in the form of either Thomas Aquinas's absolute divine simplicity or the multitude of Protestant metaphysics, thus losing the Church's relation to the *logoi* that Maximus and the rest of the Eastern Church Fathers speak of. Absolute divine simplicity in particular becomes a stumbling block when trying to comprehend the Orthodox mystical connection to the *logoi* in Maximus's theology, with western Christians either prone to dismiss it altogether in their ignorance or others calling it a pagan insertion into the "true" Christian doctrine, a conspiracy theory that is hardly backed up by any primary sources.¹³⁶

The Roman Catholic church in principle does not reject the Orthodox teaching that God is both unknowable essence and knowable energies, but rather they have distorted as Aquinas emphasizes the absolute divine simplicity of God, therefore reducing God to a "substance" in the language of Aristotle. Maximus uses Aristotle quite extensively in his works, but never does he attempt to reduce God to an undifferentiated singularity bearing no distinction. Vatican I (1870) in its *Dogmatic Constitution* affirms this, stating, "Since *He is one, singular, completely simple and unchangeable spiritual substance* [emphasis added], He must be declared to be in reality and in essence, distinct from the world, supremely happy in Himself and from Himself, and inexpressibly loftier than anything besides Himself which either exists or can be imagined."¹³⁷ Although the first articulator of this simplicity is the famous western Saint Augustine of Hippo, St. Dionysius the Areopagite and St. John of Damascus changes the false dialectic of philosophical categories that Aquinas delved into and declares that God is beyond such a logical affirmation.

¹³⁶Unless if one cherry-picks across the entire spectrum of the Church Fathers and take what little they can find out of context, the theory that Emperor Constantine fundamentally changed the Ancient Church is baseless.

¹³⁷*Dogmatic Constitution* "Dei Filius", Chapter One "God, Creator of All Things"

There is no manufactured conflict between western or eastern Fathers in the Ancient Church on divine simplicity, but this is merely a matter of emphasis between Rome and the east.

Father Stephen Damick states that:

The Orthodox agree in a sense with divine simplicity, that God does not have “parts,” but with our emphasis on salvation as *theosis* and on God as Persons (rather than as a “substance”), it makes more sense to teach in terms of His unknowable essence and knowable energies than to dwell on a philosophical category like simplicity. If God is encountered as simple substance rather than as Persons who can be met and whose energies may be participated in, then His otherness imbalances out His approachability and nearness.¹³⁸

In fact, the west’s preoccupation with what Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams calls the “incongruity” of God with mankind may be the root of this issue, as all Christians can agree on the antimony of God being both approachable and unapproachable, yet the west—in comparison to the east—focuses on the unapproachability.¹³⁹ This is not merely an esoteric religious issue but has far-reaching societal effects as seen in the current trends of reducing Christ to a moral teacher and not the theanthropic God-man desiring intimate spiritual communion with man. The west’s emphasis on the “otherness” or “incongruity” of God with man is entirely at odds with Orthodox teaching of mystical communion, in effect denying 2 Peter 1:4 of partaking in the divine nature through *theosis*. Consequently, the west lost the *logoi* doctrine of Saint Maximus, as it is not possible to believe in a recapitulation without the *logoi*, and therefore not possible to believe in the *logoi* without the divine essence/energy distinction, because *logoi* are uncreated energies.

¹³⁸Damick, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy*, 73.

¹³⁹This is particularly reflected in mainstream pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic spiritual practices.