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BYZANTIUM



The Sources of Authenticity

By Fr. Chrysostom MacDonnell

I have often thought that, when people ask us, what's new in the Orthodox Church, we should always reply, 'nothing, thank goodness!' One of the things we are grateful for is the way in which our Orthodox understanding of Christianity never changes; what we believe is intrinsically the same as that which was proclaimed by the Apostles. In writing about this faith, the Fathers of the Church worked with the same proclamation, guarding and expounding a great treasure: the pearl of great price; the very secret of the kingdom of heaven itself. Entrusted with the same deposit of belief, our bishops are teachers, *'faithfully dividing the Word of Truth.'* In this way, through the ages, the sources of Holy Tradition have been guarded from heterodoxy in all its guises.

What we call Holy Tradition is not the dead repetition of what has gone before, as if we lived in some ecclesial version of Mervyn Peake's Gormanghast, where everything once done, had to be recorded and repeated in the same fashion, according to the books. Having said that, however, there have been dangerous times in the history of the Orthodox Church, when the loyal, ritualised repetition of the formulae have at least preserved the collective memory of the faith, like a grain of seed buried in the earth which, in due course, has borne fruit in times of renewal. One might think, for example, of remarkable survival of the Russian Church after decades of Communist persecution. There were often times when she could do little else but serve the Liturgy – yet, what fruit that prayer has brought! Neither is Tradition a kind of chain letter, endlessly copied out and passed around to all we know. Rather, from the same starting point, God the Holy Spirit guides us into all truth. It has rightly been said that Holy Tradition is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

Holy Tradition also has growth, yet remains the same thing. Like expanding ripples from a stone dropped in a pond, or like a Russian doll, essentially the same at the centre as at the very outside. This tradition of faith is not confined to one element only: it is multiform yet each form contains the essential truth of all the others. It is not just Scripture for example, as is claimed by classical Protestantism, yet the Holy Scriptures proclaim and bear witness to the tradition. In fact, when the Orthodox Church uses the term Tradition it is not talking, at heart, about anything human at all; this is not the traditions of men

but the very essence of the Gospel itself. It is the very work of God the Holy Spirit, who activates the collective memory and 'mind' of the Church, preserving its faith pure from all heterodoxy.

So, Orthodox Christianity works with a very clear idea of itself. It is not a private confession or version of the faith linked, historically, to an individual thinker or teacher. It was unaffected by the Scholastic Movement of the Mediaeval Western Church or by the later Reformation, as occurred in Western Europe. It avoided the Modernism that affected the Roman Church in the 19th and 20th centuries. It knows nothing of the so-called Post-Modern Movement that has so greatly influenced many liberal Protestant denominations today. This, though, is not to say that, from time, Orthodoxy had not been infiltrated by contact with western Christians or that their ideas did not influence Orthodox thinking and practice. Tsar Peter the Great certainly brought western ideas into his realms. Yet renewal in Orthodox experience has always been a revolution by Tradition; a rediscovery of what it truly was and should be from its very foundation.

It is no wonder, therefore, that those western Christians who come across Orthodoxy react with startled horror or sighs of refreshment. Most of all, we cannot be surprised at the anonymity of Eastern Christianity in Britain in particular and the profound ignorance about Orthodoxy among even the educated Christian public. There is also to be detected, perhaps, among some who encounter our faith and our Church for the first time, a type of embarrassment, following the realisation that this is where they come from, like a fugitive child finding, after many years, the mother who bore it! Whether Roman Papalism or the other 25,000 Protestant denominations, they can all, ultimately, trace their origin from us. Indeed, to their minds, they might think of us as an engine that stalled about a thousand years ago; an ossified megalith that has shown no signs of life since then! It is not unusual, to judge from books on ecclesiastical history written from the western perspective, to find that we disappear from view sometime after the year 1054, to be consigned forever to scholarly oblivion. True, world political events have begun to alter this tunnel vision but the steady and very quiet growth and consolidation of Orthodox Christianity in Britain, still remains a well-kept secret on the religious scene here.

This rather prolix introduction serves, though, to lead us to consider the origins and sources of the true version of Christianity. There will be those, influenced by the modern heresy of ecumenism, who maintain that no particular Christian ecclesial body can possibly possess the fullness of all Gospel truth; that, in fact, we human beings have still to build the true Church on earth, if only we could forget our histories and find the lowest common denominator. It is not hard to see how such a view, albeit perhaps, an exaggeration of the position, can be seen as dangerous to Orthodox eyes. For us, there is no argument, though it hurt us to appear to some as arrogant: The Eastern Orthodox Church is the Church that Christ founded. We say in the Creed that we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church; there is no other and for it to be real it has to subsist here in actuality form as well as substance. There is no 'coming' Great Church of the future, no more than we build the kingdom of heaven on earth by our own Pelagian effort and work. The Church of God is not an invisible entity waiting to be revealed at the end of time. No doubt, the sons of light will be, the righteous will be but the Church is here and now, for it is the very sacrament of the kingdom and is here to proclaim bulwark and foundation of the truth in Christ. [The real clash of course comes with our dissident sister, the Roman Catholic Church, which also makes the same historic and spiritual claim to be the-one-and-only.]

To explain this idea further it is worth considering the historic as well as spiritual source and foundation of the faith we proclaim today. To this end, one example will illustrate what I mean. Our part of the Lord's vineyard, the Church of the Patriarchate of Antioch, is actually called in its original Arabic title: The Roman Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East. When the word 'Roman' is translated in English the word 'Greek' substituted. Surprised? Well, the answer is partly to avoid confusion with the Roman Catholic Church but, interestingly, it is not used when translated in German – there, the word 'Rum' is used. The actual historic reason for this is that the 'Roman' in the title refers to The New Rome – Constantinople. The people of the old Christian city of Constantinople, Byzantium, to give it its original name, referred to themselves as 'Romans' because the Eastern half of the Roman Empire continued down to the year 1453. They saw themselves, with an understandable sense of civic pride, as being in a long, continuous line, starting in the eighth century BC. It was St. Constantine the Great who

transferred the imperial capital to the ancient Greek settlement of Byzantium at the beginning of the fourth century AD. Right up to and beyond the Great Schism of 1054, Byzantium (Constantinople) guarded the same Apostolic faith without any essential change. Rome, once the senior patriarchate and a co-guardian of the tradition, fell into dissidence. The cities of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and other centres of the historic faith, gradually fell under the political control of Islam through its aggressive expansion. Byzantium alone was left free as the champion of the ancient deposit of faith and was thus left 'first among equals' of the ancient Orthodox churches. Those Eastern Orthodox Christians, living under the yoke of Islam, could still look to their fellowship with Byzantium as the guarantee of their own authenticity.

If, therefore, we look to the Byzantine tradition as the protector still of the truth of the gospel and the source of our inspiration, it is no surprise. Our theology, our Liturgy, our spirituality, our iconography, our music, is all described as Byzantine. This is not say that nothing comes from elsewhere, that would be patently false. Our liturgy, for example, is largely Antiochian, both in form and custom; it was introduced into the Byzantine Church by none other than St. John Chrysostom. The monastic traditions of Jerusalem greatly influenced the Typikon – the rules by which the services are celebrated. Yet it was Byzantium that gathered these treasures old and new, like the householder in the gospel parable and recognised them as her own and of her own.

The proverbial time traveller from fifth-century Western Syria would feel generally at home at a Liturgy in any of our churches, though the music might be rather strange to his ears sometimes. One even from Gaul or Britannia might find the rites different in many ways, but the ethos and the teaching would be essentially the same. Of what other Christian denomination in the world today could that be said?

There is nothing foreign in this idea that the Byzantine tradition is the paradigm of what Christianity truly is. If we are told it lies elsewhere, then how would we know it? If no one possesses the whole truth of the gospel, then how do we gather in this amalgam scattered abroad and how do we know when we have enough? There can only be one Church or how else can we be assured of salvation? If naïve Ecumenism is a modern heresy, then the re-emergence of Orthodoxy in Western Europe is the rediscovery of a treasure – not the pearl of great price itself but the map of where to find it buried us. Something that used to be part of the very religious fabric of our own land, the faith of our ancient fathers before the Norman Conquest, is now reviving among us.

There is a view that would propose the city of Jerusalem as the centre of Christian unity. Of course, the faith began to be proclaimed there; it was the site of Our Lord's death and resurrection. The faith went out from there, received and guarded by The New Rome, spreading to the whole Orthodox world. It is not, however, the old Jerusalem for which we are striving through our ascetic and synergetic struggle, but the new, the heavenly Jerusalem above which is free (Galatians.4:26). Our journey, though, begins figuratively from Constantinople; we walk in her faith. The Byzantine Empire was not, itself, the kingdom of God. If it had not eventually fallen, however, many might have been tempted to believe just that! The old city was taken in 1453 by a foreign invader with an alien and aggressive faith. But the real treasure of Byzantium was not her plundered gold and silver or her priceless works of art, stolen by the Venetians and others in 1204. Her real treasure is still with us and we are its guardians who, by a singular paradox, keep it by sharing; we possess it by giving to others.

Our Orthodox faith is like the consecrated 'Lamb' at the communion which is 'divided yet never disunited; eaten yet never consumed.' The name we give this faith: 'Greek Orthodox' is, of course, a theological term and not an ethnic one referring to any nation. We could just as well be called 'Roman Orthodox' or even – as our faith is perfectly catholic according to the Creed – 'Roman (i.e. new Rome) Catholic' but that really would be confusing, now, wouldn't it!

Lost and Found

A sermon preached by Father Michael Harper in St Botolph's Church, Bishopsgate, February 19th 2006

Luke 15:11-32

Introduction

The parable of the prodigal son is the best known of all Christ's parables. It is very different, for example, from the parable of the unjust steward that follows it (in chapter 16), which reflects Middle Eastern business life, and which is very hard for westerners to understand. But the parable of the prodigal son, although as we shall see it has eastern nuances, is about family life, and so much easier to understand and appreciate. It has been called "the Evangelium in Evangelio" and so it is – the "gospel within the gospel"..

Kenneth Bailey in his book *Through Peasant Eyes*, writes of this parable, "nearly everyone has a sense of awe at its inexhaustible contents".

This parable is not an allegory, for the father is not "God incognito". Yet the father in this story is a profound symbol of God the Father.

In some ways the parable has been misnamed, it should perhaps be called the parable of the elder son. Surely the punch line of the story comes at the end with the conversation between the father and his elder son. We are also told about the audience which was composed of a mixture of tax collectors, sinners and Pharisees. The Pharisees were disputing about Christ sitting at table with those they regarded as the riff-raff of society. Their attitude matched that of the elder brother when his brother returned.

The parable is a superb introduction to Lent, because the centre point of it concerns repentance. It is to challenge, so to speak, our preference for the equivalent of feeding on pig's swill rather than to dine at our father's table. Lent should be for us a change of direction. It is a return to the Father who has been waiting patiently for us to come.

- The Love of the Father

Nearly sixty years ago I made an important discovery about this parable. I found that whenever I read it, or heard a sermon on it, there was always something new to learn. I have to admit that when I started preparing for this, I wondered, "does the magic still work?" Well, I am glad to say the answer was "yes".

I want us to see two aspects of the Father's love, and it is the first that came fresh to me. For we see this love in the father's response to the demand of his son to share the inheritance with him.

Kenneth Bailey describes this as "unbelievable love". He has lived much of his life in the Middle East and North Africa. In his book he describes a period of fifteen years during which he travelled from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan, asking villagers the same question, "do you know of anyone who has asked his father for the inheritance while the father is still alive." Here is the conversation which was repeated over and over again:

"Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?"

"Never"

"Could anyone ever make such a request?"

"Impossible!"

"If anyone ever did, what would happen?"

"His father would beat him, of course!"

"Why?"

"This request means – he wants his father to die!"

L Levison writing about this says, "there is no law or custom among the Jews or Arabs which entitles the son to a share of the father's wealth while the father is still alive".

To sum up, Kenneth Bailey writes, "it is difficult to imagine a more dramatic illustration of the quality of love than this".

An Arab, Ibrahim Said, who has written a commentary on this Gospel has written about this, "this action is unique, something which has not been done by any father in the past".

The second aspect of the love of the Father which I want us to look at is the demonstration of it when his son returns.

The father is said to be "filled with compassion". The Greek word (*splanchna*) literally refers to the bowels – the very centre of our being. Hence the way the word "guts" is used in English. This love is not primarily mental or emotional, but comes from the father's total being.

We also read that the father RAN to meet his son. There may well have been a practical reason for this – the desire to be there before the villagers, who might have given the prodigal short shrift. But Kenneth Bailey states clearly that "an oriental nobleman in flowing robes never runs anywhere." In the East it is regarded as humiliating. The Greek philosopher Aristotle once wrote, "great men never run in public". But the father did – as a demonstration of the intensity of his love for his son.

But more evidence of that love and acceptance follows:

- The kiss of reconciliation.

The Greek word means to kiss "again and again". It was not a ceremonial peck, but an outpouring of affection. In eastern villages to this day the kiss was the traditional sign of the end of a dispute.

- The best robe

No doubt this was his father's own robe, and so demonstrated his father's full acceptance of him.

The ring, which meant "you are trusted"

The shoes, which signified that he was a freeman, not a slave.

The fatted calf, which showed that the whole village community was involved, not just the close family. In the early church confession was normally made to the community not privately to a priest. So here the reconciliation of the father and son is seen not merely as a private and individual matter; everyone in the neighbourhood was also involved.

There is a story told about another "prodigal" who left his home and led a dissolute life, which was a disgrace to his parents. He too decided to go home, but he was uncertain what the response would be.

So he wrote to his parents to tell them what he was intending to do. And he asked them to put a small white handkerchief in the top left corner of a window as a sign that he would be accepted back.

As he drew near to his home he looked carefully for the handkerchief. It was not there – but in its place was a huge white sheet; the message was plain, you are welcome home and all is forgiven.

So it is with God's love for us. Yes, God does part with the inheritance if that is what we want; but when we come home the response is overwhelming – there is no period of probation, no regime of penances, and no tagging. Total acceptance – no questions asked.

In the Orthodox service of Matins for the Sunday of the Prodigal Son we read: "God restores all the signs of glory".

- The Repentance of the prodigal

We see this in two main steps. First of all we are told that:

"He came to himself"

This is not repentance, and the normal Greek word for repentance – metanoia is not used. In the Syriac version we read "he came to his nefesh", which is certainly not the word for repentance. The words "he came to his senses", although not accurately translating the Syriac, is probably as close as we can get in English to what is being said.

It would seem important as we approach Lent that we realise our need to be arrested by it, and to realise fully the seriousness of our condition. The prodigal began to change when he realised where he was and how he needed to go home.

Then we are told that he rehearsed what he was going to say to his father:

"I have sinned against heaven and before you".

We notice again the connection between God (heaven) and the community, symbolised by his father. Both are to be joined together.

Our sins against God are also sins against the community.

- The response of the elder brother.

The German theologian Helmut Thielicke has written a book called *The Waiting Father*. In it he makes an interesting suggestion. What would have happened if the prodigal had met his elder brother before he met his father. He might well have gone back to the far country.

Ibrahim Said writes, "the elder brother

has been living in the house with the spirit of a slave, not with the familiarity of a son".

How often it must be that people never get to meet God because they meet elder brothers. Some years ago I was travelling on a Lebanese airliner and talking with one of the stewards. I asked him the question "are you a Muslim or a Christian?" His reply was "neither, I've had to live through the Civil War."

St Paul writes that "because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying 'Abba! Father! So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God'" (Gal 4:6-7).

The elder brother, although he was living at home, had the spirit of a slave; on the other hand his brother was ready to be a slave in his father's house, but was treated by his father as a son.

Let us allow the Holy Spirit to give us that Spirit of Sonship, which will bring us from the far country to the Father's love and presence.

"Repentance" by Fr. Alexander Haig

The hall-mark of a Christian must be repentance. It is at the heart of the Gospel. It is there in the first preaching of Christ: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4.17). He was echoing the words of St John the Baptist (Matthew 3.2) – or rather, St John was the Forerunner of Christ, in this and in so much.

Repentance presupposes that we have sinned. So the knowledge of one's sins is necessary before we can repent.

We are all sinners; even the greatest Saint is a sinner. It is inherent in our human nature. St Paul says, "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3.23)

Yet it is quite common today for a Priest to be told by someone that he has not sinned.

But if you read the lives of the holiest people, the Saints, you find that they are the ones who are the most conscious of their sinfulness.

Saying that, "I haven't committed any sins," partly shows a lack in the person's own awareness of himself. If you are not sure that you do really need to go to confession, examine your life against Christ – who is indeed the fullness of the glory of God - and you will see in him that there is certainly no sin. See his perfection, and this will cast light into the darkness of your own soul.

However, sometimes we may indeed go to confession and say, "My sins are all the same as they were last time: I just feel wretched and unworthy, and I realise that I need cleansing and forgiveness, the mercy of God."

That may on occasion be all one can say. It is then acceptable to God. (This is not to say that if we deliberately do not mention a sin, which we are aware of, we can by this method get away with it!)

So, let us learn to examine our conscience a little more fully this Great Fast, to repent a little more deeply of any sins we have committed. Let us not say too little in our confession, but also we must not fear that we have not said enough, if that is the way we are led by the Spirit of God this time. It is the job of the confessor, the Priest hearing the confession, to unravel anything if he thinks this necessary.

What matters for us is that we open up sincerely to the grace-giving, life-giving Spirit. Christ will re-enter our soul and pour in love, peace and joy.

Repent! Have a good Fast!

Father Alexander Haig

Christ is Risen! by Fr. George Hackney



Shortly after Pascha this year some non-Orthodox clergymen appeared on a Television programme to tell the world that they did not believe that Jesus of Nazareth was really God incarnate. They also proclaimed to the viewers that they did not believe that He rose from the dead. It seemed that they believed that they themselves were too clever, too well read, too well educated and too scholarly to accept the witness of the New Testament as the Orthodox Church has received and preserved it.

They also claimed that most of the clergy they knew secretly thought the same way but kept their doubts secret and did not share them with their congregations. At this point I switched off the TV - because I had heard it all before in my Anglican days. Indeed I have listened to such men and women and read their books carefully to weigh their arguments for almost 40 years now. There is nothing new in what they have to say. And still I believe that Christ is God incarnate and that He is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death !

It is as true today as it was when St Paul first declared it that the actual physical Resurrection of Christ after his real and actual death is the foundation rock of the Orthodox Church and the Christian Faith. As St Paul wrote, ³ If Christ be not raised then we are of all men most to be pitied and our faith is vain.² Over the centuries and right up to our own times the Orthodox faithful have accepted Martyrdom in their thousands rather than deny the Divinity of Christ and truth of the Glorious Resurrection.

During the present Paschal Season the Scripture Readings in the Services of the Holy Orthodox Church continually remind us of the appearances of the Risen Christ to his disciples and his apostles.

The Risen Lord would appear suddenly, unexpectedly, out of the blue. They never knew where they would see Him next, or when. They learnt to live in constant expectation of his appearing. Every time he reappeared he had something new to teach them, or some clear instructions for them to follow. They learnt that the Risen Christ was not a ghost, but a real bodily person, who appeared to them physically, in a body that could be touched and felt to be truly real. Yet it had new qualities which it never had before the crucifixion and the rising again. The resurrection body of Christ had both physical and spiritual properties. St Paul, struggling for words to describe it, called it a *Æspiritual body*¹. It was real and solid - and yet in it our Lord could appear and disappear at will. He could eat fish and share a meal with them - yet he could also pass through locked doors !

They, blinded by bereavement and drowning in doubt, often failed to recognise Him the first time they saw Him. They didn't recognise Him because to see Him alive was the last thing they expected. It couldn't be Him - he was dead ! It wasn't natural - Indeed it wasn't - it was supernatural ! The body of our Risen Lord is a body fit for life in another world than this. It is a body fit for the life of heaven. A body that bears the scars of the earthly life - yet a body that is now beyond the reach of disease and death - a body transformed, risen and glorified. A body fit for the Son of God.

Our present bodies are not like that. Our bodies are subject to disease and disability, infection, trauma and decay. From the moment we are born we begin to die. The older we get the more the aches and

pains remind us of our mortality. Even many of the young the fit and the strong may not survive the dangers of accident, murder or sudden death.

Don't you wish that you had a perfect healthy body like that of the Risen Lord ? a body beyond the reach of death and decay ? a body with the best attributes of the physical and the spiritual, all rolled into one ?

Well you can have !

Because Jesus did not rise for himself alone. He promised that as He is now, so we one day shall become. He is the trailblazer. The pioneer who leads the way. We have only to follow Him, to trust and obey Him and be joined to Him by the Sacraments, and we shall become like Him - in the unimaginable bliss of Eternity!

First we receive through Him the forgiveness of sins, which he won for us on the Cross. That is a spiritual gift - and the beginning of the restoration of the the Image of God which sin has deformed within each of us.

The second step is to receive the resurrection, in which, following death, our souls will be re-clothed in in the glorious immortal body of the resurrection. That is a physical gift.

In all the life of mankind the physical and the spiritual are interwoven and inseparable. We are sacramental beings who can express our spiritual nature only by means of physical forms and in no other way. That is why the Orthodox Christian Faith teaches us to believe not only in the immortality of the soul - but also in the resurrection of the body. Not only in the resurrection of Jesus - but in your resurrection dear reader, and my resurrection, and the resurrection of all the redeemed.

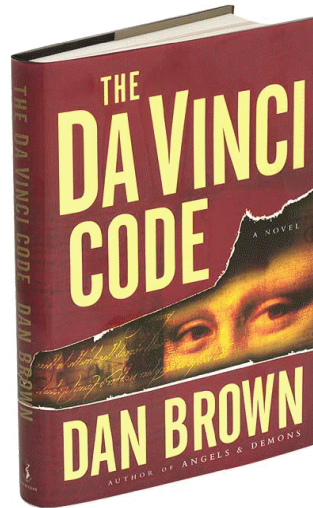
Death is not a dead end, as the secular people around us believe. There are in this country many liberal ministers of Religion who have no hope of heaven. They are proud to proclaim that Christ is not risen and death is the end of existence for every man, woman and child. For them Christ is a Teacher and an Example - but not a Saviour That is their faith. They cannot prove it. It is their belief that death is the end of everyone. That is their chosen faith. The faith they choose to organise their lives around. It is the dogma and the doctrine of secular people that death is the end. It is a very dogmatic doctrine. The dogma that death is the end is the dogma that our Society conforms to.

The dogma that death is the end is pressed into people's minds in this country of ours by the newspapers they read, the films they go to see, the popular books they read, and above all by the endless flow of TV programmes that saturate their minds. All re-enforced by the atheistic assumptions of day to day conversation in pub and club, office and school, factory and fireside. The Media which saturates the minds of our Nation today is an Atheist/ Agnostic Missionary Media. It is certainly not Christian. But neither is it value-free. The Media provides a constant saturation of secular assumptions, values and propaganda. The population of this country are constantly subjected to a kind of negative evangelisation - they are soaked in the secularism which preaches that death is a dead end and there is no real and actual God ! And most of the viewers and listeners don't even notice that this brainwashing is going on. It hits them at a subconscious level. It poisons their minds against the Christian Revelation.

Yet death is not a dead end. It is a doorway. A doorway to a richer, fuller life, - as demonstrated by Christ our Lord. Christ is Risen ! Risen indeed !

by Father George Hackney, Assistant priest at the Community of All Saints of Lincolnshire, St Matthias Church, City of Lincoln.

A Critique of what *The Da Vinci Code* says about The EMPEROR CONSTANTINE and the COUNCIL OF NICAEA



A paper presented by Father Bill Olnhausen on June 15, 2006 at a *Da Vinci Code* Seminar sponsored by St. Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Church, Cedarburg, Wisconsin

Dan Brown and Tom Hanks and Ron Howard say, "Don't take this so seriously. *The Da Vinci Code* is just a story, it's fiction." No, it is a mix of fact and fiction, and it doesn't distinguish between the two - as if someone wrote a story about the American revolution and had the British win, or about the election of 2000 and had the Supreme Court rule in favor of Gore. These would be interesting speculations, and here we would know how to separate fact from fantasy. But with *The Da Vinci Code*, unless you know early Church history well, how do you tell truth from fiction? So people wonder: Might it have happened as *The Divine Code* says? And since this goes to the heart of the Christian faith, this is serious.

Can we know what really happened in ancient times? Granted, history is not entirely objective: events are seen through the eyes of people; three people can describe the same event three different ways. However there is historical evidence, we possess ancient documents, and usually we can tell when something is being made up. Since I am not a professional scholar, the following is a sort of term paper. I've taken a small section from *The Da Vinci Code* - what Leigh Teabing says about the emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, pages 251-254 in my Anchor Books paperback edition - and will try to tell you what is accurate and what is not. I have some knowledge of this: Every May 21 we Orthodox celebrate the feast of Saints Constantine and Helen, and on the Sunday after Ascension we commemorate the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council (the First Council of Nicaea). I will quote directly from the book. (In the movie, Teabing's words are altered somewhat.) Teabing says many things dogmatically. Some of them are true.

1) *The Bible as we know it today was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.* This is not true. More than a century before Constantine, Christians had accepted most of the New Testament books without much controversy. There is no evidence that Constantine had anything to do with it.

2) *Constantine was a lifelong pagan who was baptized on his deathbed, too weak to protest.* This is a blend of fact and fancy. Constantine was baptized not long before his death. Does that mean he was a pagan? No. At the time Christians sometimes postponed Baptism for fear of committing major sin afterwards. (A politician might well worry about that!) That was a misunderstanding of Baptism; it doesn't mean he was a pagan. Perhaps he also wanted to be emperor to all the people. It is recorded that he visited pagan temples, much as an American Christian president might visit a mosque or a synagogue. There is no evidence that as emperor Constantine participated in pagan worship; notably, after he conquered Rome he did not offer the customary pagan sacrifices. Constantine's mother Helen was a Christian; she raised him after his father emperor Constantius divorced her, so he grew up under Christian influence. Constantine said he was converted to Christ by a vision of the cross inscribed with the words "*in this sign conquer*". Even before

that, Christian priests traveled with his army. There is no evidence that he was baptized because he was “too weak to protest”; rather it was written that he welcomed Baptism and for the rest of his life wore not imperial robes but only his white baptismal garment.

3) *In Constantine's day, Rome's official religion was sun worship - the cult of Sol Invictus, or the Invincible Sun - and Constantine was its head priest.* Actually, Romans worshipped many gods, including the emperor. Emperor Aurelian dedicated the great Roman temple of Sol Invictus on December 25, 274. Constantine may have worshipped Sol early in his life. He allowed images of the sun to remain on Roman coins, and he retained the imperial title Pontifex Maximus (high priest) of the cult of Sol Invictus. Why? Perhaps it was for reasons of political expediency. But Christians also used sun and light language about Christ, so this may also have been his way of “transitioning” the empire into Christianity.

4) *Christians and pagans began warring, and the conflict grew to such proportions that it threatened to render Rome in two... In 325 AD [Constantine] decided to unify Rome under a single religion, Christianity... [As a] good businessman...he could see that Christianity was on the rise, and he simply backed the winning horse.* This is an oversimplification. Actually there had been tension between Christianity and paganism (and sporadic persecution of Christians) for three centuries. In the early fourth century, the pagan emperors tried to exterminate the Church. Constantine ended this persecution by his Edict of Milan in 312, and began to give preferential treatment to Christians. But before Constantine, Christianity was in danger of being wiped out. It was Constantine who made it the “winning horse”.

5) *Constantine converted the sun-worshipping pagans to Christianity. By fusing pagan symbols, dates and rituals into the growing Christian tradition, he created a kind of hybrid religion that was acceptable to both parties. The vestiges of pagan religion in Christian symbology are undeniable. Egyptian sun disks became the halos of Christian saints. Pictograms of Isis [nursing Horus] became the blue-print for our modern images of the Virgin Mary nursing Baby Jesus. And virtually all the elements of the Catholic ritual - the miter, the altar, the doxology, and communion, the act of 'God-eating' - were taken directly from earlier pagan mystery religions... Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian God Mithras...was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days. By the way, December 25 was also the birthday of Osiris, Adonis and Dionysus. The newborn Krishna was presented with gold, frankincense and myrrh.* Yes, there were many pagan antecedents to Christianity. How could there not be? Jesus was not the first baby to be born or carried by a mother. Christians took pagan art and converted it; Orthodox iconography developed directly out of Egyptian funerary art. When Christ said "Whoever eats my flesh...dwells in me and I in him" and instituted the Holy Eucharist, he drew on pagan totem religion, in which people identify with a particular animal, then sacrifice and eat it, receiving its life force into themselves. There are pagan gods who die and rise, symbolizing nature's annual cycle. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians chose to celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25, near the winter solstice, a day previously used for pagan gods of light. All this is true. Teabing has a few inaccuracies: for example, Osiris' birthday was July 14 not December 25, and no Hindu text says Krishna received gold, frankincense and myrrh. But Teabing is right: Christ and the Church built on pagan foundations, as well as Jewish. This is not a new discovery, nor is it shocking. He is incorrect, however, to say this was Constantine's invention. Also contrary to Teabing, there is something original in Christianity. As C. S. Lewis put it, in Christ “*the myths became fact*”. In the myths, gods lived once upon a time, nobody could really say when or where. Christians claim that the one God really became incarnate, died and rose in Palestine in the time of Augustus Caesar, and there were eyewitnesses. That is unique to Christianity.

6) *Christianity's weekly holy day was stolen from the pagans. Originally Christianity honored the Jewish Sabbath of Saturday, but Constantine shifted it to coincide with the pagan's veneration day of the sun...Sunday.* Yes, Constantine made Sunday the imperial day off. For the rest, no. It is well documented that from the beginning Christians worshiped on Sunday to celebrate Christ's resurrection - sometimes on Saturday night, following the Old Testament pattern: "there was evening and morning, a first day". We Orthodox still begin the day at sunset, and many Christians keep eves of Sundays and feasts. The linguistic evidence that we worship on Sunday because of Christ (not the sun) is that in Greek the first day of the week is called not Sunday but *Kyriake* (Lord's Day).

7) *At [the Council of Nicaea] many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon - the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of the sacraments, and of course the divinity of Jesus...until that moment in history Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal. Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea. A relatively close vote at that.* Here we have documentary evidence: five eye-witness accounts of the Council of Nicaea. We have the Council's decisions; we know many details. To be precise, the bishops voted on what words to use to express the divinity of Jesus. The rest of what Teabing says is false. Till the fourth century, Jesus' divinity was not controversial among Christians. There are many clear references to it in the New Testament and the early Fathers, long before Constantine. It was not Christ's divinity that some doubted but rather his humanity. The gnostic gospels (so-called) claimed that Jesus was divine but not fully human. Gnostics believed matter is unworthy and that Christ certainly did not take *flesh*. St. John is typical in warning against those who deny that Christ came "in the flesh". Teabing has this totally wrong. The first notable follower of Jesus to suggest that he was a created being was Arius in the fourth century, and even he didn't say that Jesus was only a man, only a prophet. He appears to have believed that Jesus became divine, was adopted by the Father at some point, like certain Greek gods. In response the bishops approved the first part of what we call the Nicene Creed: Christ is "God of God, light of light, begotten not made, of one essence with the Father...who for us men and for our salvation was incarnate and made man". These words were not invented by Constantine. Except for the term "essence" (*homoousios*), they were taken from an old Palestinian creed. Finally, the vote: Of the 318 (some say 348) bishops at Nicaea, only two voted no: Theonas of Marmaric and Secundus of Ptolemais. Is that a "relatively close vote"?

8) *Because Constantine upgraded Jesus' status almost four centuries after Jesus' death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling his life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke... Constantine commissioned and fashioned a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up and burned.* This also is entirely untrue. We know of no documents before Constantine that said Jesus was only a man. There is no evidence that Constantine commissioned a new Bible or authorized bookburning. The bookburning was done by his pagan predecessors who tried to destroy all Christian documents. Nor did Constantine insist on the divinity of Christ. The evidence suggests that he did not grasp what the theological dispute was all about: all he seems to have wanted was that Christians stop fighting. In fact Constantine later fell under Arian influence: he exiled St. Athanasius of Alexandria, the chief defender of Christ's divinity, and he was baptized by an Arian bishop who denied Christ's full divinity. This passage is totally inaccurate.

9) *Establishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base. By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengable. This not only precluded further pagan challenges to Christianity, but now the followers of Christ were able to redeem themselves only via the established sacred channel - the Roman Catholic Church.* From my Eastern Orthodox perspective, these references to the Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church are just off the wall. Constantine had already moved his capital out of Rome to Constantinople, now called Istanbul. The Nicene Council was held not in Rome but in the east near Constantinople, and of the 318 or so bishops who attended only five came from the Latin west. Pope Sylvester of Rome sent only two priests - no bishops, so he didn't even have a vote. The decisions at the Council were made by eastern bishops, and eastern Christianity has never been under the jurisdiction of Rome. Rome's only connection to the Council was that they endorsed its decisions. To say the Council was a Vatican power grab is absurd. And, to be accurate, there was a further pagan challenge to Christianity: Constantine's nephew the emperor Julian the Apostate tried to reestablish paganism in the empire.

10) *Constantine took advantage of Christ's substantial influence and importance. And in doing so he shaped the face of Christianity as we know it today.* This is true, but maybe not in the way Teabing thinks. Constantine did use Christ and the Church to unite his empire - but there is much evidence that he did so because he sincerely believed in Christ. We Orthodox see Constantine as a truly great man who ended the persecution of the Church and allowed the bishops freedom to clarify and hand on the original faith of the Church. It was because of him that Christianity became established in the world and has been passed down

to us. In that sense, indeed "he shaped the face of Christianity as we know it today". That is why, despite his failings - which were many - we Orthodox title him Saint Constantine. But he did not *create* Christianity as we know it today.

I hope I have demonstrated that these four pages of *The Da Vinci Code* are a mix of fact and fiction - an undifferentiated and (I would say) devious blend of truths and falsehoods. Now, extend this into the remaining 485 pages. All I can say is: if after this you trust the information in this book or find the theories convincing..., I've got a bridge I want to sell you.

[For non-US readers:- The reference to the "bridge" at the end of this article concerns the Brooklyn Bridge, the subject of a 19th century joke about an immigrant who was offered a chance to buy it for \$5. Ed.]