



STATEMENT DE245

A Summary Critique: Dancing Alone

Eastern Orthodoxy has over 255 million adherents worldwide, with over five million of these residing in America. Roman Catholics and Protestants are so accustomed to viewing Christianity through a Western (Latin) prism that they forget that their faith began and first developed in the East. An Eastern Christian, Ananias from Damascus, Syria, baptized the apostle Paul (Acts 9:1-19). Followers of Christ were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:19-26).

Even in the Western church during the early years, theological leaders often originated from the “Romanized” East — including Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. Indeed, of the five patriarchies (ecclesiastical jurisdictions) that emerged in the early church — Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem — only Rome was in the West. The church was Hellenized (influenced by Greek culture) before it was Latinized.

All Orthodox Christians are informed by the theological formulations that proceeded from the first seven general councils. Indeed, “all profess that there are seven holy and Ecumenical Councils, and these are the seven pillars of the faith of the Divine Word”¹ Therefore, Eastern Orthodoxy is often referred to as “the Church of the Seven Councils.”²

During the past two decades, the evangelical wing of the church has experienced a number of defections. Although most have joined the Roman Catholic church, not all of the Converts traveled to Rome; some have found their way to Constantinople.

A group of evangelicals converted to Orthodoxy in the mid-1970s, and the most visible among them has proven to be Peter Gillquist.³ Gillquist is quite articulate and spends a great deal of time in evangelical venues preaching the advantages of his new ecclesiastical home. However a new convert to Orthodoxy has surfaced, and he is not quite as restrained or irenic as Bishop Gillquist. His name is Frank Schaeffer.

Frank Schaeffer (or “Franky,” as he was known before he became Orthodox) is the son of the late evangelical Presbyterian scholar, Francis Schaeffer. After coming to faith in Christ, the elder Schaeffer studied first at Westminster Theological Seminary and then at Faith Theological Seminary. In 1948, he and his wife Edith moved to Switzerland where he “founded L’Abri, an international study center and caring community in the Swiss Alps, where he offered an analysis of modern man’s thought and a critique of secular culture from a Christian perspective.”⁴ The L’Abri ministry was extended by Schaeffer’s writings and many young people came to faith through its outreach.

His son, Frank Schaeffer, is a filmmaker and has been very vocal in his criticism of the cultural decline in our society. In his book *Dancing Alone*, he explores the reasons for his conversion to Orthodoxy.

The book is 327 pages in length and has a foreword written by Bishop Methodios of the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Boston. In the “author’s note of acknowledgment,” Schaeffer writes, “I am a novelist and film director, not a historian or theologian. I have no research staff. I am not a scholar” (p. xiii). This will become painfully clear to anyone who can patiently plow through this volume.

Schaeffer establishes the thesis of his book in the introduction: “The more I read, the more I realized that I had not been introduced to the historical Christian Church...” Further, “I found that I had spent half a life time in the Evangelical Protestant world without learning one iota about the oldest things.” Now come on. Frank’s early Reformed environment was not completely lacking in historical perspective. The muffled noise you hear is Francis Schaeffer turning over in his grave.

Part One, “The Age of False Religion,” primarily deals in its 12 chapters with the moral and spiritual declension that has affected American culture. Schaeffer sees within evangelicalism (as well as within the mainline denominations) an apathy and permissiveness toward secularism and moral relativism. Moreover, according to Schaeffer, the root cause of the debasement of American culture is “the dreadful mixture of dehistoricized Evangelical Protestantism, Enlightenment Secularism and secularized, American-style Roman Catholicism that has become our nation’s civil religion” (10). This disjointed theme appears early in the book and recurs throughout.

At least Protestants are not the only ones to blame for this sorry mess; Schaeffer indeed paints with a broad brush: “Tragically, the American Roman Catholic Church has also become almost as trivialized as its Protestant counterpart” (51). Concerning Thomas Howard’s book, *Evangelical Is Not Enough*, Schaeffer comments: “Sadly Howard, who converted to the Roman Catholic Church, is describing a liturgy that no longer exists in modernized Roman Catholicism” (*sic*). Nonetheless, Schaeffer reserves a special place of contempt for his former evangelical environment.

Chapters One through Four deal with culture-war subjects such as feminism, speciesism, and secularism. In Chapter Five we come to what is for Schaeffer the centerpiece of his thesis: the Western church’s complete misunderstanding of the nature, theology, liturgy and mission of biblical Christianity — Protestantism (evangelicalism/fundamentalism, as well as the mainline churches) and Roman Catholicism included. He begins with a fairly accurate description of the cultural and historical elements that led to the first fissure in Christendom, the East/West Schism.

Now Schaeffer moves to the crucial point: “It seems to me that at the heart of the growing apart lay two different visions of Christianity or even of God, differences which persist to this day” (64). Translation: The Western church has a faulty understanding of God.

The major reason for this misunderstanding was that “the Roman Church in the West was dominated by the theology of St. Augustine...” (64). This will come as a shock to traditional Roman Catholics and evangelicals who equally honor the Augustinian tradition as an accurate representation of the apostle Paul’s writings. Schaeffer’s criticisms of Augustinianism (and later the theology of Anselm and Thomas Aquinas) are repeated throughout the remainder of the book — in the body of the text and the footnotes as well.

Continuing his appraisal of the Bishop of Hippo, Schaeffer affirms that “St. Augustine’s own writings tend to contradict his later works” (65). Augustine’s theology “became a rationalistic system of belief that, building on certain isolated elements of St Paul’s writings, and the influences of pagan philosophy, evolved into a rationalistic dualism — a closed system of theology — stripped of mystery and awe” (65). How anyone who has even a casual acquaintance with the writings of this spiritual giant (*Confessions, The City of God*) could say such a thing is beyond this reviewer’s comprehension.

Schaeffer piles misunderstanding upon distortion: “Augustinianism teaches that so-called original sin has stripped people of their intrinsic value...” Further, in Schaeffer’s understanding of Augustine, the grace God extends to man “is not chosen by the sinner, but conferred upon him by God regardless of the sinner’s wishes” (66).

The Augustinian monk from Erfurt, Germany is next up for derision: “The Lutheran position is straightforward. It degrades man to the level of a beast; it contradicts Holy Tradition and Scripture and flies in the face of human experience, which is faced everyday with choices between good and evil” (67). It gets worse as he reverts to the theme of Augustinianism: “In the Augustinian West a vision of a juridical, vengeful capricious god-devil emerged” with results ranging from “the dictatorial corruptions of the papacy, to the cruelties of Calvin’s theocratic Geneva, to the evils of Calvinist-inspired South African apartheid” (72).

John Calvin and his activities at Geneva spur Schaeffer to new heights of vitriol. Calvin is accused of all sorts of cruel and unseemly behavior (82-86). Calvin’s policies at Geneva “paralleled the worst of the papal pronouncements from Rome” (85). Linkage between Augustine (who, according to Schaeffer, is the root problem) and Calvin is made: “The Western Church’s most problematic Father soon became the Calvinists’ one link with the Christian past” (86). As a caricaturist of Augustinian/Calvinist thought, Schaeffer has no equal.

The focus shifts to the American scene in Chapter Seven. Calvinism surfaces as “Puritanism.” The end result in the United States is that “Martin Luther’s, John Calvin’s, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s and Thomas Jefferson’s utopian, deterministic, religiously secularized great-grand children are alive and well” (101). Chapters Eight through Twelve continue Schaeffer’s examination of the affect that this Western theological distortion had on the American experience.

Part Two, “Authentic Orthodox Faith,” develops Schaeffer’s understanding of the antidote to our cultural ills: Eastern Orthodoxy. Issues such as the male hierarchy, order in the church, apostolic continuity, and the delusion of “reducing faith to an individualized experience” (192) are examined. The remainder of the book is difficult to systematically critique because of its rambling style and mixing of cultural and theological elements.

In the final chapter we find Schaeffer taking his newly discovered ecclesiastical home to task: “Since becoming Orthodox I have not discovered ‘perfection’ in the Church” (297). Indeed, “the Protestantizing of Orthodoxy, while not as advanced as the near-total Protestantizing of the American Roman Catholic Church, nevertheless has resulted in various un-Orthodox forms of thought and behavior” (298). Additionally, the ethnicity and apathy of many Orthodox churches is challenged, and the seductive affect that the ecumenical movement has had on Orthodoxy is lamented.

While other converts from evangelical backgrounds (such as Thomas Howard to Roman Catholicism and Peter Gillquist to Orthodoxy) often speak fondly of their former spiritual homes, Frank Schaeffer takes great pains to distance himself from his evangelical roots. His father, Francis Schaeffer, is mentioned only once — without comment — in note 5, p. 15. Also, the bibliography lists only one of his father’s many books.

The author’s tone in this book is so strident and his historical perspective so distorted that this reviewer is hard-pressed to make any positive comments. Fortunately, this is not the last word from the Orthodox perspective. Although there are significant differences between Eastern and Western theological models,⁵ Schaeffer’s severe criticisms are by no means shared by all Orthodox scholars. For example, Metropolitan Anthony of the Russian Orthodox Church in England became the Chairman of the Trustees of the C. S. Lewis Centre in London. He assumed this position because of “his conviction that despite the divorce of East and West...historic orthodoxy is still there as a sweet savor...”⁶ Metropolitan Anthony seems to have no difficulty fellowshiping with “Western” Christians.

Consider also the following: “As the late Georges Florovsky said, when queried why he, as an Eastern Orthodox refugee from both Communism and Nazism, would turn up in an evangelical, even fundamentalistic circle, “The Christian is never a stranger where our blessed Lord is loved and worshipped.”⁷

— *Ralph E. MacKenzie*

¹ John II, Metropolitan of Russia (AD. 1080-1089). Quoted in Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1983), 26. This is a standard work on the Orthodox church.

² For a valuable treatment of this subject, see Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Church: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994). Clendenin is an evangelical who is a visiting professor of religion at Moscow State University.

³ Gillquist had been a leader in Campus Crusade for Christ. His story may be found in his book, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990).

⁴ R. W. Riegsegger, “Schaeffer, Francis August” in Daniel G. Reid, coordinating editor, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 1050.

⁵ For an evangelical appraisal of Eastern Orthodox motifs, see John Warwick Montgomery, *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals and Rome* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), 25-32.

⁶ Andrew Walker, “In Defense of Ecumenical Orthodoxy,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Ecumenical Orthodoxy*, Winter 1994, 13.

⁷ Harold O. J. Brown, “Foreword,” in Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995). Also, for a brief treatment of Eastern Orthodoxy, see the above volume, Appendix A: “The Churches of the East.”