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## An AGAIN Interview with Dr. Bradley Nassif, Theologian and Witness

Bradley Nassif has been a courageous and enthusiastic pioneer of Orthodox-evangelical dialogue around the world. Dr. Nassif holds a Ph.D. from Fordham University, where he was one of the last students of the late Fr. John Meyendorff. He also holds an M.Div. from St. Vladimir's Seminary; an M.A. in New Testament Studies, Denver Seminary; an M.A. in European History, Wichita State University; and a B.A. in Religion and Philosophy, Friends University (Wichita, KS). Dr. Nassif is currently professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at North Park University (Chicago).

A consultant for Time and Christianity Today magazines, Dr. Nassif has been a television commentator for the documentary series "Christianity: The First Thousand Years" and "The Jesus Experience: Jesus Among the Slavs." Much of his work over the past 30 years has been devoted to introducing evangelical students and faculty to the riches of the Orthodox tradition. He served as the director of academic programs at Fuller Seminary and was a visiting professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Regent College, and the Southern Baptist Seminary.

Among his numerous publications are the chapters entitled "The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church" (in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, ed. James Stamboulis, Zondervan, 2004), and "Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism: The Status of an Emerging Global Dialogue" in Daniel Clendenin's *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 2003). He is also the general editor of *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* (Eerdmans). The current focus of his scholarship is on a forthcoming book titled *The Westminster Handbook to Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). This will be a comprehensive reference volume for laymen and scholars to use for understanding the major theologians and doctrines of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the ancient and modern worlds.

He can be contacted directly via e-mail at:  
blnassif@yahoo.com.

AGAIN: Welcome, Dr. Nassif, to AGAIN Magazine. We're honored you've joined us. By way of introduction to our readers, could you tell us about your background and your personal mission within the Orthodox Church?

Bradley Nassif: First, please allow me to thank you for the honor of this interview. Your magazine is reaching some of the most important people in the Orthodox world, namely the laity, so I am especially privileged to serve them in this capacity. I believe the future of our Church rests largely with ordinary Christians, so I hope my answers will encourage them to fulfill their gifts and calling. I hope our clergy will also be strengthened. They need all the love and support we can give.

I can summarize my career for you very simply. I'm a "kerygmatic" theologian—a witness to the fullness of the Kingdom of God in the life of the Church. (The Greek word *kerygma* in the New Testament means "the message or the proclamation" of the Gospel.)

I'm a cradle Orthodox, born of Lebanese parents. I had originally intended to become a priest. But although I was religious, I was also spiritually lost. Even though I went to church every week, had read a lot and was morally upright, I had no personal relationship with Christ, nor did I have a clear understanding of what the Gospel was. When I was 17, however, I had a life-changing experience with God, due in part to the outreach of evangelical friends in high school. Looking back, I had what Ss. Makarios of Egypt, Symeon the New Theologian, and Gregory Palamas called "a conscious experience of God in the heart." I went from a dead Orthodoxy of the letter to a living Orthodoxy of the Spirit. My baptismal vows were fulfilled.

In my professional life, my energies have been directed toward the academy and the Church—both are important. Until recently, most of my academic work has focused on ecumenical theology. I've been very concerned to build bridges between Orthodoxy and the Protestant community. I've represented SCOBA in the Orthodox-Lutheran Dialogue of North America, and started the Society for the Study of Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism in 1990. Over the past 20 years, it has been my privilege to introduce the Orthodox tradition to Protestant evangelical students and faculty in North America and Canada through friendships and classes. I think I'm the only Orthodox theology professor in America working full-time in the religion department of an evangelical institution.

On the writing front, the most important chapter I've written so far is titled "The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church" (in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*). There I try to show readers that Orthodoxy has a very distinct evangelical character to its theology and that it is imperative for priests and people to recover it as the centerpiece for church life today. In defending our faith against evangelical Christians, we've often failed to see the evangelical character of our own tradition. So in that chapter I try to explain the evangelical vision of the Orthodox Church in relation to its liturgical and theological history.

I'm still very active in ecumenical dialogue. I really would like to see Orthodox churches partnering with evangelical communities as much as the Church's theology will allow it. That still needs to be worked out, but it's starting to happen very slowly among a small number of courageous priests in all the jurisdictions of North America.

My current focus, however, is now shifting to Orthodox theology itself. That's where my forthcoming book *The Westminster Handbook to Eastern Orthodox Theology* will come into play.

AGAIN: In this issue, we're focusing on the different roles members of the Church play. Can you speak to what you've learned about what it is like to engage with people in and out of the Church as a lay professor, historian, and theologian?

BN: One task of a good theologian is to critique the contemporary life and practices of the Church. Theologians must know the tradition well so they can help the Church stay faithful to it. One of the key areas I've been concerned about is

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the need to empower the laity, and help them redeem the routines of everyday life.

In working with ordinary Christians over the years, I've concluded that most of us have underestimated our spiritual potential. Our existing attitudes and practices in many Orthodox parishes around the world have effectively disempowered common Christians as second-class citizens in the Church. Many—by no means all—of those ordained to a hierarchical ministry frequently misinterpret the Ignatian model of ministry along the lines of a dictatorial or "guru" form of leadership, in which the deacon, priest, or bishop thinks and acts as though he is above and beyond accountability to those he serves. All this has led to a widespread systemic illness in the Church from the top down. Church leadership ends up virtually controlling the laity and weakening their ability to fulfill their spiritual gifts.

Fortunately, this crippling state of affairs is gradually beginning to change in some parts of the Orthodox world, such as the Greek Orthodox clergy/laity congress and the Orthodox Christian Laity organization. Still, I'm convinced that it's time for us to unleash the laity! Bishops and priests need to work harder at exercising a Christ-based model of leadership which empowers their flock with the gospel so that the whole body of Christ may function effectively.

Closely related to that is the need to help parishioners integrate their faith with the workaday world of everyday life. I try to do this by offering weekend seminars in our churches entitled "Desert Spirituality for City Dwellers." When I worked as a Honda salesman, I found myself in need of integrating faith with the marketplace. I ended up viewing my job as a spiritual arena where I would die to self and grow through all the various tasks I did throughout the day. Making 20 phone calls a day became an exercise in ascetic discipline; responding to a rude customer became an opportunity to grow in patience; working with a joyful heart gave witness to the Resurrection of Christ in my soul. I began seeing my daily tasks in a new light. I transformed my vision of work into a spiritual cause. That's what I mean when I say we need to help people connect the dots between Scripture and what they do at work and home.

AGAIN: Based on your experience introducing evangelicals to the riches of the Orthodox tradition, do you find there are certain key elements, certain fundamentals of the Orthodox Christian faith, that are essential to share with people about Orthodoxy if you want to spark their interest in the faith?

BN: In my classes at North Park University, I've discovered that the greatest treasure to share with other Christians is the spirituality of our Church. Students love learning about it. In my course on Christian Spirituality I begin by surveying the history of spirituality, East and West, and then spend the rest of the course teaching students how to live the Christian life based on the lives of the desert Fathers and Mothers from the third to fifth centuries. I talk about commitment to Christ, prayer, fasting, icons, the sacraments, contemplative Bible reading, meditation, hospitality, and worship. It opens up a whole new world to them. Some students end up attending a nearby Orthodox church. So I think the best place to go for people who are already Christians is to the spirituality of our Church. It's the great ocean into which flow the rivers of all our theological dogmas.

AGAIN: What has your continuing engagement with evangelicals taught you about your own faith, and about evangelism and the Great Commission in particular?

BN: There are at least three things I've learned from evangelicals in relation to your question. First, it is possible to be "sacramentalized" but not "evangelized." By that I mean it's possible to be religious but lost. Our people can go to church every Sunday, take communion, tithe, even be ordained, but still not know God. That is a great tragedy that can be easily overcome by our own mystical theology.

Second, we need to focus on the centrality of Christ, not the centrality of "Orthodoxy." Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not against the creeds, councils, and Fathers of the Church, nor am I minimizing the fullness of the tradition. How could I and still be Orthodox? Rather, I'm against the formal, dead sort of Orthodoxy. Too often we become obsessed with Orthodoxy as a sick religious addiction. We think that just because people go to church, they must know God, when in reality many do not. Just because the Gospel is formally included in the liturgy doesn't mean that our people have understood and appropriated its message. Many of our churches really need to recover the evangelical dimensions of the faith. I believe our Church is ready for renewal, and I'm ready to help the bishops and priests if they wish to ask me, because I'm fairly certain about where the Church has been and where it needs to go in light of our mystical theology. Third, we need to be clear about the gospel and make it the core of our life and ministry. Following our Trinitarian and Incarnational vision of life, we need to constantly recover the personal and relational aspects of God in every life-giving action of the Church. We need to be clear about the message we preach. Jesus, in His Trinitarian relations, died for our sins on the cross, rose from the grave, and is coming again. He is Lord of all, and that needs to be proclaimed in every way possible, which is exactly what our liturgy does.

The most urgent need in world Orthodoxy at this time is the need for an aggressive internal mission of rededicating or converting our priests and people to Jesus Christ. The Great Commission demands it. But we aren't focusing on that. Instead, we're constantly contrasting ourselves with the Catholics or Protestants and letting that dictate the emphases of our ministries. This is very dangerous because it takes our attention off the Lord and onto theological differences. As a theologian, I know very well that differences do matter and it's important for our people to become aware of them—especially in the Bible belts. But enough is enough. We'll be better off spiritually if we take massive action to help our parishioners simply grow in theosis (divinization).

AGAIN: CS Lewis, speaking about evangelism, said: "I am not sure that the ideal missionary team ought not to consist of one who argues and one who (in the fullest sense of the word) preaches. Put up your arguer first to undermine their intellectual prejudices; then let the evangelist proper launch his appeal. I have seen this done with great success." It

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seems that in an academic environment, most of your evangelism would be of the kind that speaks to the intellect. Is this actually so? And do you think that this kind of approach to evangelism and outreach – an appeal to both mind and heart - is what we should be aiming for?

BN: About seven years ago, while living in California, I experienced a very difficult time in life. I suddenly found myself without a job, no income, a mortgage to pay, a wife and newborn 4-month old baby to care for. In desperation, and with no technical skills that my theological training provided, I ended up working as a car salesman. For three years I sold Hondas and in so doing acquired skills that I still use to this day. While working I rubbed shoulders with all kinds of salespeople: Muslims, Jews and pagans of all sorts. In all that time there was hardly a believing Christian anywhere to be found.

One of my best friends was Sam, a Muslim from Palestine. We often talked about our religious differences. Can you imagine what it must have been like day after day? Me, an American Lebanese Christian trying to evangelize a Palestinian Muslim? In the give and take of conversation, he would quote the Q'uran in Arabic and I would quote the Bible. Sometimes the conversation got heated, but our love for each other always kept us together as friends. One thing I learned from Sam is that I could not reach him without engaging his mind. It was full of misconceptions about the Christian faith. Whenever I spoke of the "Son" of God he would retort that "God has no 'son' because there is only one God, and that is Allah!" He also rejected the cross, the resurrection, and much in the four Gospels. I found myself in need of translating the technical language of 4th century Trinitarian theology into the everyday speech a Muslim could understand. Scripture and the writings of Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers (to name just a few) needed to be explained in a way that did justice to the "oneness" of God without falling into "tri-theism." I also discovered that I could reach Sam through our Church's liturgical music. That came as quite a surprise to me, but after thinking about it, it made sense because we Arabs are, in general, pretty emotional people. He would sing Muslim songs and I would sing "When Thou O Lord was baptized in the Jordon, worship of the Trinity was proclaimed!" I saw his eyes light up, filled with tears. After months and even years of sharing the gospel with Sam, one day he said to me, "Brad, I am very close to accepting your religion." I replied, "I don't want you to accept my religion, Sam. I want you to accept my God." He quietly pondered it, but still has not crossed the bridge. We continue to call each other from time to time and I keep praying that one day he will cross that bridge and come to Christ.

So should we use both mind and heart? Absolutely. But always with love. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" said St. Paul. (1 Cor. 8.1) We need to know what we believe and how to explain it to others. But more people will be won to Christ through our love than through our knowledge. We need to make sure that our knowledge is the servant of our love.

AGAIN: Do you believe there are particular lessons we can learn from the way evangelicals have encountered Orthodoxy that are important for reaching out to people of other faiths as well, both Christian and non-Christian?

BN: I have strong opinions about that. It always saddens me to hear of Orthodox people (converts or cradles) distancing themselves from evangelical believers. That is a big mistake. We should fellowship with evangelicals, not engage in an Orthodox Jihad against them. I've been asked to go to Romania next year just to help initiate an Orthodox-evangelical dialogue in that country. I'll be speaking at Orthodox and evangelical institutions.

One thing I've learned from my Middle Eastern upbringing as well as travels to Russia and the Middle East is that Orthodoxy over there is very different than it is here in the US. Their social, political, and religious context is different from ours, which means that their expression of Orthodoxy will be shaped in part by their response to their environment. An Islamic or former communist country asks questions that we in America do not. Orthodoxy in those lands has a long history which has bred a lot of nominal Christianity.

So evangelical and non-Christian encounters with Orthodox Christians in those lands have not always been positive. Non-Orthodox people meet all kinds of problems and think that is what Orthodoxy stands for. Few leaders or laity seem to have a mature grasp on their own faith, and the Church is sometimes marked by ethnocentrism, religious bigotry, or declared disinterest in the Christian West by Orthodox rigorists. All this is bad advertisement for the faith.

There are two ways to address this: one is external, the other is internal. The external way speaks to those who peer inside our windows, so to speak. We need to help outsiders make a distinction between authentic Orthodoxy and folk religion. Explain that what they see is not necessarily what the Church stands for. Get their attention off the public reality and onto the Church's faith. Make a distinction between the people's poor witness and the true God whom the Church worships. There's no other way I know to honestly address the low level of commitment and understanding among Orthodox Christians.

The other way to address these problems is through an internal approach. We need to be brutally honest by looking at ourselves and admitting that we are not relating very effectively to our contemporary world. Without sacrificing the content of our rich liturgical music and theological tradition, we need to find ways to contextualize our faith and liturgy effectively in the modern world. Fr. Edward Rommen, a priest who teaches at Duke Divinity School, is a great Orthodox missiologist who could possibly help us with that.

We need to figure out how to relate to unchurched people in North America, because most of our converts are not unbelievers, but disillusioned believers from other Christian traditions. We should not accept all of Orthodoxy uncritically today, or deny that there are parts of our ancient liturgies which seem to have no biblical justification. There needs to be a liturgical renewal that is consistent with the time-honored practices of our Church's mission theology.

Our Church music exemplifies the problem. Instead of creating new American tunes for our theological lyrics, we betray the faith by simply watering down Byzantine or Russian notation to make it palatable for Americans—as though there was something eternal about Byzantine or Russian sound! Think about it. How were the Slavs originally evangelized? By

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translating the Bible, Fathers, and liturgy from Greek into the language and culture of the Slavs. How did St. Athanasius defeat the Arians? By taking scriptural teaching and translating it into the Hellenistic concepts of pagan philosophers (for example, he redefined homoousios to mean Jesus is “consubstantial” with the Father). So why are some American bishops so afraid of doing that today? I think it’s because they’re deathly afraid of making any changes that would alter the faith. That, of course, is praiseworthy, but it simply is not the way Orthodoxy has adapted to local cultures. The history of missions always tells us to contextualize the faith by putting it in the garments of the cultural idioms of the country it inhabits. We are not to fossilize it through a stifling theology of repetition.

AGAIN: You've worked extensively with the modern media industry. What do you think are three things Orthodox Christians can do to increase their exposure and influence through the media?

BN: First, be informed and balanced about our own faith. Before we can speak, we need to know our own religion and earn the right to be heard. Bad press—or no press—comes from people who have zeal without knowledge. Every television and radio interview I’ve ever done has been initiated by the interviewer, not by me.

Second, we need to know our audience. It makes no sense to talk about Orthodoxy in the abstract. We need to tailor our talk to the ones who hear us. Again, I come back to the word “contextualize.” We need to translate our concerns into the vocabulary of those who hear us.

Third, we need to “sell the difference” to the media. What do we have to say that others are not already saying? Once we answer that, the next step is to make ourselves available to the media.

These are commonsense answers, but I suppose that’s why I’m just a garden variety type of theologian.

AGAIN: What are your thoughts on the future of traditional Christian education in general, and Orthodoxy in particular, in academia?

BN: I’ll answer your question in relation to what is going on in mainline and state schools, evangelical seminaries and Orthodox institutions in the United States.

Mainline and state universities such as Princeton, Harvard, Columbia and Duke are opening up to the Eastern Orthodox world. Orthodox professors are teaching there on a full or part-time basis in various theological disciplines. Others, such as the University of Chicago Divinity School, are less open. Part of the reason for an increasing openness to Orthodoxy is because it is politically correct to be inclusive and tolerant of all religions. However, the study of Orthodoxy in these places is not as strongly supported as is Islam, Latino studies and feminist theology. Still, it’s a start. I have good contacts at Duke Divinity School and know for sure that if we could get enough money together we could actually start an Institute for Orthodox Studies there. The problem, however, is selling people on the idea that theological education is just as important as Christian social work. Most potential contributors don’t have the background to appreciate the strategic importance such an Institute would have, so they give their money elsewhere. If any of your readers are able to help in this regard, I hope they’ll contact me.

As for evangelical schools, most have closed their doors to any full-time Orthodox faculty. Wheaton College, Westmont, Fuller, Gordon Conwell, Columbia International University, Moody Bible Institute and others wish to retain a narrow definition of what it means to be an “evangelical” and thus (wrongly I believe) exclude the Orthodox from it. Some, such as Wheaton and Westmont, have made it an official policy that they will not hire any full-time Orthodox or Catholic teachers. By hiring me, however, North Park University is now leading the way for other evangelical schools to see that having an Orthodox faculty person can actually enrich, not impoverish, the spiritual lives of their students.

As for Orthodox institutions, they are few in number which only increases the importance of what they do. St. Vladimir’s and Holy Cross seminaries have some excellent teachers, several of whom are actually very open to evangelical scholarship (Frs. Stanley Harakas, Harry Pappas, Ted Stylianopoulos and Emmanuel Clapsis, for example). Still, I must say that these institutions as a whole are having a difficult time staying collectively focused on the basics of the gospel in their pastoral training programs. Future priests need their Orthodox teachers to emphasize the ABC’s of the New Testament in their ministries more than how many times to say “Lord have mercy.” I’m convinced that the only way this can happen is for us to recover the evangelical dimensions of our own theology and place it at the very center of all we do in Church.

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