

The Orthodox Tradition and Canada's Most Significant Public Philosopher: George Grant

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George Grant has been called one of the most important public intellectuals in Canada in the latter half of the 20th century. In his *Athens and Jerusalem: George Grant's Theology, Philosophy and Politics* (2006), Graeme Nicholson called him "Canada's most significant public philosopher" (p. 323). George Parkin Grant had a wide ranging mind and imagination that covered and touched most aspects of the Western and Eastern traditions. Grant was a Christian renaissance humanist in the best sense of that compelling term. The fact that Grant was drawn to the best of the Western theological, philosophical and political tradition meant that he encountered the riches of Orthodoxy in his many probes. This brief essay will touch on Grant's encounter with Orthodoxy. I will ponder his encounter and engagement with the Orthodox tradition in five unfolding phases.

First, Grant's initial encounter with Orthodoxy was through the marriage of his sister, Alison Grant, to George Ignatieff. Grant had studied with George Ignatieff's brother, Nicholas, who taught History at Upper Canada College in the 1930s. But the meeting of George Ignatieff and Alison Grant, and their marriage in November 1945 brought Grant into the centre of the Russian Orthodox way as it was embodied in England and Canada in the World War II period. George Ignatieff had this to say about his Russian Orthodox heritage in his classic book, *Memoirs of a Peacemonger*:

The Orthodox Church gave me a sense of belonging, of being in touch with my roots, of safety and stability in an otherwise confusing world. Even in early childhood I derived great comfort from prayer and from the familiar Orthodox liturgy, and I have remained a devoted member of the church ever since.¹

Ignatieff had this, also, to say about the unusual nature of the wedding:

We were married in Montreal, in the United Church in deference to Alison's family and in the Russian Orthodox Cathedral for the sake of mine.²

The Ignatieff family was well known in Russia, but they had to flee the country when the communists came to power. George's father (Count Paul Ignatieff) was the last Minister of Education in Russia under the Czar, and even though he was at the forefront of reforming the educational system in Russia before the revolution, he saw the writing on the wall in 1917. The Ignatieff clan, initially, moved to England, then to Canada. George Ignatieff became a prominent civil servant in Canada, and he worked closely in the 1940s- 1950s-1960s with Lester B. Pearson.

Ignatieff's book, *The Making of a Peacemaker: The Memoirs of George Ignatieff* (1985) tells the tale well of the journey of the Ignatieff clan from Russia to England to Canada. There is little doubt that Grant, as a young man, would have been exposed to Russian Orthodoxy through his friendship with Nicholas Ignatieff and the fact his sister was married to George Ignatieff.

The son of George Ignatieff and Alison Grant is Michael Ignatieff (former leader of the Liberal party in Canada), and Michael has written about the Ignatieff – Grant family connection in *True Patriot Love: Four Generations in*

1. George Ignatieff (in association with Sonja Sinclair), *The Memoirs of George Ignatieff: The Making of a Peacemaker* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p.33.

2. *Ibid*, p. 84.

Search of Canada (2009). There emerged in the 1950s-1960s serious tensions between George Grant and George Ignatieff. Grant felt that the Pearson-Ignatieff duo had become fawning servants of the emerging American empire, and this difference fragmented the family. Grant thought that there was an indigenous form of Canadian nationalism that had to be affirmed to resist and oppose the liberal Canadian drift into the embracing arms of imperial America. Grant's argument for this position is clearly articulated in his classic political missive, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965). It is essential to remember President Kennedy was quite involved in backing Pearson in the 1963 election, and Grant was astutely aware what this meant for the future of historic Canadian Toryism.

It is somewhat interesting to note that George Ignatieff never mentioned George Grant (his well known brother-in-law) in *The Making of a Peacemonger*. It seems the two men had quite different understandings about what it meant to be a peacemonger. But, there is no doubt that George Grant's exposure to Orthodoxy came through the Ignatieff family. It is too bad we do not have any serious records of conversations that took place between George Grant and George-Nicholas Ignatieff on Orthodoxy.

It is significant to note that after George Ignatieff had finished his more active role as one of the more prominent Canadian diplomats of the 1950s-1960s, he was offered the position of Provost of Trinity College (the leading High Church Anglican College of the time in Canada) in 1972. There was an implicit convergence of the Orthodox tradition and catholic Anglicanism via George Ignatieff, and the Ignatieff-Grant family connections facilitated this pioneering Orthodox-Anglican dialogue within the Canadian ethos. In some important ways, the Orthodox-Anglican ethos as embodied in the Ignatieff-Grant families had some affinities with the English St. Alban-St. Sergius convergence of Anglicanism and Russian Orthodoxy.³

3. The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius was founded by Russian Orthodox who fled to England after the 1917 Russian Revolution and High Church Anglicans. Nicholas Zernov was a founder of St. Alban & St. Sergius, and his history of the organization up to 1979 with his wife,

George Grant did have his differences with George Ignatieff, but he was quite miffed, though, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau bypassed George Ignatieff for the role of Governor General in 1979.⁴ I do see in Ignatieff's close relationship with Pearson, and Pearson's close alliance with Kennedy contra Diefenbaker, Ignatieff's explicit merging of church, Canadian politics and American empire. Ignatieff was, at the time, a member of St. Thomas parish (anglo-catholic) in Toronto, but his implicit Russian Orthodox understanding of church and state still lingered. The Americans were the major opponents of Russian communism, Canadian-American relations formed the North American phalanx against Russian communism, therefore Pearsonian Liberalism and Kennedy's Democrats made for a heady opposition to the communism Ignatieff so opposed. It was this updated Constantinian synthesis that Grant so saw through and opposed in *Lament for a Nation*. The historic High Tory Canadian Tradition could offer a third way beyond the Cold War dualism and ideology, and Grant was at the forefront of suggesting such a vision.

Second, when Grant became chair of the Religious Studies department at McMaster University in 1961, he was quite keen to check the drift of liberalism by bringing to the University those forms of Christianity that embodied the more classical Christian way.⁵ It is important to note at this juncture that Grant's more catholic form of Anglicanism made for many an affinity with the Orthodox way,

Militza, *The Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius: A Historical Memoir*, tells the tale well of the origins and history of this Anglican-Orthodox Sobornost organization up to 1979. The Fellowship continues to this day. I was quite fortunate when doing graduate studies at Regent College (Vancouver, BC) from 1979-1981 to be the Teaching Assistant Jim Houston (first Principal of Regent College). Jim had lived with Nicholas Zernov in Oxford from 1947-1953, and both Zernov and Houston spent a great deal of time with C.S. Lewis. Lewis was also involved with the Fellowship. George and Sheila Grant, when at Oxford in the 1940s, were quite involved with C.S. Lewis.

4. William Christian, *George Grant: A Biography*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 340.

5. *Ibid*, p. 235.

and in England at the time much work was being done on Anglican-Orthodox dialogue (the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius was on the cutting edge of this deeper ecumenism).

Grant would have imbibed the Anglican-Orthodox dialogue that was going on in England in the 1930s-1940s, and this made him eager to bring the dialogue to the Canadian context. Grant had been active in C.S. Lewis' Socratic Club when at Oxford, and the outside reader for his Ph.D. thesis was Austin Farrer (both men had decidedly classical and mystical leanings). George Ignatieff, as a young man, had attended the well known Anglican Trinity College (High Church) in Toronto in the 1930s, and George and Alison Alison had an affinity with the High Church Anglican-Orthodox way that was unfolding in Toronto.

The selected letters of George Grant (*George Grant: Selected Letters* (1996)), make it clear that Grant was drawn to what he identified as some of the sounder and more stable aspects of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox way in opposition to the way he thought that the Anglican tradition was capitulating to liberal modernity ("George Grant and the Anglican Tradition" in Ron Dart's *George Grant: Spiders and Bees* (2008)). There is no doubt, therefore, by the early 1960s Grant had a growing interest in Orthodoxy, and he was keen to get Orthodox theologians lecturing at McMaster University.

Third, when Grant was doing research on Simone Weil in the 1960s, he read Philip Sherrard's *The Greek East and Latin West* (1959).⁶ Sherrard's read and interpretation of Orthodoxy had a profound impact on Grant for a variety of reasons. Sherrard had suggested in *The Greek East and Latin West* that the clash between the East and West hinged on the way the West had accepted at the Third Council of Toledo (AD 589), and ratified such a position in 1014 that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Son (Jesus) and the Father. This move by the Roman Catholic West is called the '*filioque* clause' which deeply offended the Greek

6. *Ibid*, pp. 232-233.

Orthodox Church. What is the issue at the core of the dilemma, and why was Grant drawn to Sherrard's read of the clash and its implications? There is no doubt that the conflict separated the Eastern Orthodox from the Western Roman Catholics, and Grant took the side of the Orthodox on this issue. Does it really matter whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone or the Father and the Son? Why bother quibbling about such details? But, details can make a difference, and this is what interested the Orthodox Sherrard and Grant.

For Grant, the distinction is important for the simple reason that the West attempted to too clearly define God, God's Being and God's energies (economy), whereas the Orthodox tradition was more willing to dwell in the Mystery and Essence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The fact that the Roman Catholic church attempted to be too sure about the economy and operation of God by the inclusion of the '*filioque* clause' (the relationship between Father, Son, Spirit and Son and Spirit) worried Grant. It was this Western need to sharpen, clarify and fully understand that blinded the West to that which could not be comprehended. Grant thought that Aristotle was back of the Western Roman Catholic-Protestant way, and Plato informed the more mystical and contemplative Orthodox way.⁷

It was the meditative Orthodox way that Grant held high, and he thought that Western Christianity had lost its spiritual and mystical way. Grant was fusing Simone Weil, Sherrard and Orthodoxy in the 1960s-1970s, and he knew where he stood and why. Grant, therefore, saw in the '*filioque* clause' the budding of the Western rationalist way that would blossom into the need of 16-17th century science for clear and distinct ideas, and the Western technological drive in the 19th-20th centuries to master through reason and will the earth, knowledge and human relationships. It should be noted, though, that Grant thought the origins of sheering willing could be located in the Hebrew canon. The God that willed creation, chose the Jewish people, elected some and not others, commanded the Jewish nation to slaughter other peoples was, Grant feared, a god in which Will

7. *Ibid*, pp. 232-237.

often trumped the Good. The modern synthesis of 'Willing-Techne-Reason' can be located at the very fount and source of the Jewish-Christian tradition.⁸ So, the Eastern-Western debate about the '*filioque* clause' was just one more act in such an unfolding drama. This means, therefore, Grant went to much older places than Sherrard to examine and explore where and when the beast of unleashed willing emerged from the depths.

Fourth, Grant had a real fondness for Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, but he was more drawn to the Russian Orthodox vision of Dostoevsky than Tolstoy. In 1941, he commented on Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and he favoured the former to the latter. Grant's lecture in 1959 on Dostoevsky on CBC for 'Architects of Modern Thought' walked the attentive listener and reader into the centre and core of Dostoevsky's painful probes of the human condition. Grant drew from Dostoevsky's novels to highlight the depths to which humans can sink and the heights to which the saints can rise. Where but in such Russian classics so grounded in the Orthodox way could such a tantalizing vision be articulated and lived? There is no doubt, also, that Dostoevsky was a profound critic of the way Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church had become Westernized and modern, and he attempted to reverse this capitulation to liberal modernity.

Grant was very much with Dostoevsky in the clash between the ancients and the moderns, and he thought the ancient and time tried way of Orthodoxy was absolutely needed and necessary to question the progressive liberal drift of the modern world. Grant gave a series of lectures in 1976 to graduate students on "Platonic Christianity," and in the final lecture, he dealt with "Dostoevsky's Christianity."⁹ The lecture went deeper and further than his 1959 CBC lecture on

8. Ron Dart, "Biblical Judaism, Western Christianity and Liberalism," in *George P. Grant: Canada's Lone Wolf* (Abbotsford: Fresh Wind Press, 2011).

9. Grant's lecture 'Dostoevsky's Christianity' is printed in *Athens and Jerusalem: George Grant's Theology, Philosophy, and Politics* (edited by Ian Angus, Ron Dart, Randy Peg Peters (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 233-237.

Dostoevsky, and in the span of the presentation he pondered Dostoevsky's understanding of the relationship of suffering and freedom, and more to the point, how the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* embodied, in the most beguiling and seductive way, the temptation of the West and Western Christianity.

The Jesus of *The Brothers Karamazov* confronts the Western Christian church. The Roman Catholic Church had become the Judas figure in many ways. Jesus' reply to the Grand Inquisitor is a kiss on the cheek. Such a kiss speaks volumes. There is no doubt where Grant stood in all this. The Orthodox vision of Jesus in *The Brothers Karamazov* comes as an affront and challenge to the Judas-like church of Western Christianity. Grant had by 1976, in many ways, fused the theological Greek-Russian Orthodox traditions with the literary Russian Orthodox tradition in his reflections on Sherrard and Dostoevsky.

Fifth, a good teacher is often indebted to those that have gone before, and their students and such wise teachers pass on, like a torch, the noblest that has been given them—Grant is no exception to this truth and reality. What, though, has this to do with Grant and Orthodoxy? Grant was a member of the Socratic Club at Oxford that C.S. Lewis started and developed. Grant had a high view of Lewis, and the affinities between the two (Lewis the elder and Grant the novice) have been duly noted in my article “C.S. Lewis and George Grant: A Tale of Two Anglican Tories.”¹⁰ Lewis was a Classical-Medieval-Renaissance scholar, and Grant walked the extra mile to hold high the ‘discarded image’ of such an ancient way of thinking and being. The fact that Lewis was so grounded in the classical tradition meant that both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions have often seen Lewis as a convincing embodiment of their heritages. The well known English Orthodox bishop and theologian, Kallistos Ware, for example, has written quite fondly of Lewis in his touching and timely article, “God of the

10. Ron Dart, “C.S. Lewis and George Grant: A Tale of Two Tories,” in *The Canadian High Tory Tradition: Raids on the Unspeakable* (Dewdney: Synaxis Press, 2004).

Fathers: C.S. Lewis and Eastern Christianity.” Ware has called Lewis an “anonymous Orthodox.”¹¹

Grant was held by Lewis, and Lewis’ rooting in the classics (and by implication Orthodoxy) was something that Grant would understand. Grant also passed on his interest in the Russian Orthodox and Classical way to his students. Bruce Ward did his MA and Ph.D. with Grant at McMaster University, and Ward’s two books on Dostoevsky are Canadian classics on this seminal Russian writer. *Dostoevsky’s Critique of the West: The Quest for the Earthy Paradise* (1986) is Ward’s doctoral thesis completed under Grant turned into a book, and *Remembering the End: Dostoevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (2000) turns once again to the insights of Dostoevsky as a prophet to the failings of the liberal west.

Spencer Estabrooks, another student of Grant’s at McMaster, is now an Orthodox priest, and is front and centre in the running of St. Arseny Orthodox Institute in Winnipeg. Archbishop Lazar, unlike Bruce Ward and Spencer Estabrooks, never studied with George Grant, but as one of the most prominent Orthodox theologians in Canada and the USA, Lazar has a high regard for George Grant, and the way Grant attempted to integrate the often fragmented realities of spirituality and politics. It is significant to note, also, that David Goa (yet another prominent Orthodox intellectual in Canada) has tipped his cap often to George Grant. Goa’s *A Regard for Creation: Collected Essays* (2008), from an Orthodox perspective, is a Canadian first on Orthodoxy and ecology, and Goa is quick to acknowledge in the missive his interest in Grant. It is obvious that Grant has passed on the Orthodox way to both Ward and Estabrooks, and both men have taken Grant’s lead further and deeper. Grant has, also, had an impact on important Orthodox thinkers and activists in Canada such as Archbishop Lazar and David Goa.

11. Timothy Ware, “God of the Fathers: C.S. Lewis and Eastern Christianity,” in David Mills (editor), *The Pilgrims Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness* (1998).

Grant's commitment to recovering the discarded image of the ancients meant he had affinities with those classical forms of Christianity that were rooted and grounded in the Great Tradition. Orthodoxy is very much immersed in such an ancient and time tried way, and this is why Grant and Orthodoxy have much in common. There is, indeed, a sense in which Grant is a probing pioneer in Canada of both Anglican-Orthodox dialogue and an approach to Orthodoxy that is not enmeshed with American imperial politics. Grant can, in many ways, offer North American Orthodoxy a way beyond its often worrisome legacy of Orthodoxy being the chaplain to the state. Grant can, also, when read aright, offer a way to challenge the present trend of a common ground between Evangelicals, Roman Catholics and Orthodox from degenerating into a reductionistic and republican read of these *ad fontes* and 'ressourcement' traditions.

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