

“The Pathway into the Kingdom of Heaven”

The Indigenization of Russian Orthodox Tradition in Alaska

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Abstract

The Russian Orthodox mission to Alaska can be understood in terms of liberative mission. The article shows how the missionaries succeeded in allowing Christianity to become indigenized in native Alaskan cultures, rather than attempting to make the indigenous peoples Russian. It did this through an attention to the narratives, religious and otherwise, of the Alaskan peoples and by allowing these narratives to address and be addressed by the Christian narrative. Current anthropological research points to the depth of the roots of this indigenization, and how it helped in the identity formation of the native peoples especially after the sale of Alaska to the United States when their identity was under severe external threat. The Russian Orthodox mission to Alaska provides a good historical case study of how the gospel can be indigenized in a way that empowers people and suggests a tradition available to Orthodox churches today as they seek to become more mission-minded.

Keywords

Russian Orthodoxy – Alaska – Innocent Veniaminov – indigenization – anthropology

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In this article I want to show how the Russian Orthodox mission to Alaska can be seen as an example of liberative mission (Bosch 1991:432–447) where the gospel, in becoming an integral part of a people's worldview, enables them to resist attempts to destroy their culture. The beginning of this mission is traditionally, though somewhat misleadingly, dated to 1794. It was in September of that year that a small group of monks arrived on Kodiak Island, just off the mainland of Alaska. They had come at the behest of the owner of the Russian America Company, Grigoriy Shelikhov,¹ who was eager to use the church in his attempts to persuade Catherine the Great to grant him a trading monopoly in the region, where animal furs promised great riches.

The misleading nature of the traditional date of start of the mission is an instructive point at which to begin. Certainly, the arrival of the monks marks the beginning of the establishment of the institutional church in the region, but importantly there was a long pre-history, something the monks themselves discovered. Many of the traders had married indigenous women, and had baptized their children, and there was even an incipient parish structure on the islands (cf. Skedros 1999:727–728). This often happened because of interaction between native customs and ways of organization and the input of the more religiously minded among the Russian hunters and traders (Mousalimas 1993:xviii–xxvii). Mousalimas further notes (xxv) that "Russian Orthodox thus merged with the people's own leadership, with their own struggle, with their destiny." It is precisely this phenomenon that I investigate in this article. Thus, even before the ecclesial mission began, there was a tradition of Christianity being incarnated into indigenous life in a way which strengthened rather than weakened or denied each its own particularity.

In what follows I will focus initially on the commanding figure of the nineteenth century in terms of the mission to Alaska. This was a man known variously as Ivan or Ioann, later Innokentii (Innocent), Veniaminov (1797–1878).² My aim is to show how he undertook first to understand, and then translate, in all senses of the word, the Christian message into the local cultures he encountered. By allowing the story/history of Russian Orthodoxy to encounter native stories/histories without having to do violence to them, Christianity was

1 In transliterating names, I will follow the sources I am using. For example, Shelikhov is also written at times as Shelikov.

2 He was born in the Irkutsk region in 1797 as Ivan (Ioann) Popov, and entered the Irkutsk Seminary at the age of 9, his father having died when he was a young boy. In 1814 he was renamed Veniaminov in honour of Veniamin, a recently deceased and popular bishop of Irkutsk. In what follows, I will use the name "Innocent", in part because this is how he is known in Alaska today.

implanted in a way that permitted it to become an important facet of identity-formation for the native peoples and a source of strength against the colonial vision of the post-1867 American government (cf. Noble 2011). In Alaska, moreover, this was arguably a desired outcome, in contrast to many nineteenth-century missions which saw themselves at least in part as having a “civilizing” role (Butlin 2009:350–359).

Encountering the Other

In 1894 the monastery of Valaam in the north west of Russia on the Finnish border, from where the first monks set out to Alaska, produced an account from its archives, concerning the native peoples of the region (Oleksa 2010:68–72).³ Although the language of the document is clearly marked by its epoch,⁴ it offers a fundamentally positive view of the local Kodiak culture. There is a deep recognition of the presence of God already at work in his creation. What was good in the religious pre-history of the native peoples was already for that very reason marked by the presence of God, and the acceptance of Orthodoxy was a way-station on the road to full participation in God (*theosis*). So, the document can say that “the Aleuts and the Kadiaks⁵ were not completely bereft of God’s Grace, as a result of which there remained with them a sense of morality which prevented them from falling into ultimate sin” (Oleksa 2010:71). It was this belief that these peoples were already embarked on the journey towards God which persuaded the missionaries to learn the languages and translate the Scriptures and liturgical texts.

There is a fascinating comment at one point in the Valaam document which seems to marry Orthodox theology with the then very new science of anthropology, not to mention evolutionary theory. It states:

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- 3 Mousalimas (1989) contrasts the attitude in this document with that of the American Calvinists who came to Alaska after 1867, whom Mousalimas claims had a much more negative view of Kodiak culture.
 - 4 For example, at one point it refers to “the half-savage Aleuts or Kadiaks”, possessing “a half-understanding of God” (Oleksa 2010:70). This is arguably at least one step ahead of much nineteenth-century mission literature, which often referred to indigenous people as “savages,” with no understanding or knowledge of God.
 - 5 The nomenclature is somewhat confusing. Kodiak (or *Kad’yak* – Kadiak – in Russian) is more properly the name in Russian of the island, coming from the *Alutiq* (or Sugpiak) word for “island.” The Aleuts lived on the Aleutian Islands, and their own common denominator for themselves is some form of Unangan, thus “Unangan Aleuts.” Exactly who is being referred to when is usually only to be determined from more specific geographic references.

The unity of man's nature, for us, is not a matter of question; it is a firm conviction. But let us also note that anthropology... since more attention has been directed to studying various peoples from a psychological point of view, cannot now but recognize that "the basic traits of human psychology appear to be similar in people with different colored skins." True science only confirms the Holy Scriptures (Oleksa 2010:71).

The Valaam compilers further note that "God is an unreachable being," and the account quotes Justin Martyr to the effect that God is "an idea, deep-seated in the nature of man" (Oleksa 2010:70). Thus, God is already known to the local peoples.

On the other hand, it must also be admitted that there is a clear implication that, though God may indeed be unreachable, "we" are a lot closer to him than "they" are. The document claims that "originally God's Revelation was limited in all its purity to the European peoples alone" (Oleksa 2010:71).⁶ Thus, in what follows, although I think the claim that Orthodoxy was indeed inculturated in a striking way in Alaska is one which can be backed up, it would be wrong to judge matters purely in terms of a western twenty-first century approach to questions of colonialism and its effects (Mousalimas 1993:xxvi–xxvii).

Indication of the Pathway into the Kingdom of Heaven

Fairly early on in his stay in Alaska, Innocent seems to have become aware of the need to produce a text which would enable the Unalaskans among whom he worked to encounter Orthodoxy in a way which would chime with their own lives and experiences. By 1833 Innocent had already written a work in Unangan Aleut, known in English as the "Indication of the Pathway into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Garrett 1979:102, 131–132).⁷ The aim of the book is to instruct the Christian or would-be Christian on how to walk on "the one path leading into this Kingdom of Heaven... the one which Jesus Christ Himself followed during His life on earth" (Oleksa 2010:81). Innocent was also desirous that the work should be "comprehensible to everyone, or perhaps it would be better to say, as much as the impoverished Aleut language would allow" (Mousalimas 1993:174

6 Mousalimas 1993:xxx1 raises the possibility that Innocent "may have been partly Native Siberian himself (while the details of his parentage are unknown, an indication exists: he was born in a village from local parentage)."

7 Chrysavgis 1999:585 refers to its publication date as 1841. However, the Unangan version came out much earlier, the first printed text in the language, for which Innocent devised a script. The translation is in Oleksa 2010:80–119. See also Mousalimas 1993:173–174, entries for March 1833.

and cf. 12, 98, 139: "I spoke about the fact that there is no other path to the Heavenly Kingdom besides that taken by Jesus Christ").

Elsewhere, Innocent suggests that the missionary should begin his preaching by demonstrating "the existence (which, however, none of those people appear to doubt), the almightiness, power and glory of the Creator of the Universe, his goodness, knowledge of all things, etc." (Oleksa 2010:241). The story of creation shows how all people "are living monuments and visible proofs of the Creator's supreme power and wisdom" (Oleksa 2010:241). This starting point leads to a fundamentally positive view of all human existence, since the other who is encountered is always in some respect an icon of God.

Innocent follows his own advice in the "Indication" and begins with Adam. In doing so, however, he draws at least as much on the Aleut creation stories as on the Bible. The Aleut, he had learned, held that: "The place where the first people came from was warm; there there were no winters or storms, but always gentle healthy breezes. To begin with, people lived in peace and knew no want. The first people were gifted with long life." (Oleksa 2010:69; Oleksa 1992:97–106). What is going on here is a narrative encounter, where Innocent allows the story he brings to be informed by and to engage with the story his listeners had told him of their own vision of the beginnings (Sarana 1999:683–687).

The Aleut also had a version of a story of the fall, though for them it was more to do with the natural world (Oleksa 2010:69). Innocent, in his work, seeks to lead them on the path to seeing Christ as the response to the harshness of their environment and the hardships of subsistence living, a journey that is always only possible in the power of the Holy Spirit. The first part of Innocent's "Indication" thus embraces the history of the people whom he is catechizing, and uses it as the starting point for narrating the story of Jesus. The second part focuses on the history-changing free self-giving of Christ on the cross, but it ends, in true Orthodox fashion, by reminding us that this Jesus who suffered for love of us is at the same time "truly God, the almighty Creator of the universe, the great King of angels and the human race, the powerful Master of all creation, the fearful Judge of both the living and the dead" (Oleksa 2010:89).

The Way to the Kingdom

The logic of these first two parts of the "Indication" is simple enough. God has created a world that is good, as the Aleut know from their own myths, and, as they also know, this initial state underwent radical change for the worse. Innocent explains why and then sets out to show what God did to restore the initial state of happiness. The third part on the path that leads into the Kingdom of Heaven sets out the response to this restorative action of God. Innocent has

striven to enter into the language and world of the peoples among whom he lives, so that they might journey with him towards life in God. And he has done this because in Jesus God himself has come to our world that we might return with Jesus to God. The unreachable God, the idea deep set in the hearts and minds of humanity, has rendered himself susceptible to touch and sight and sound (1Jn 1:1), no longer an idea, but a human being.

Elsewhere Innocent insists that no inducements are to be offered to anyone to convert, neither threats nor material rewards (Oleksa 2010:247 and Mousalimas 1993:108), a sentiment echoed in the third section of the "Indication." Innocent writes "Jesus Christ will not compel or force anyone to follow Him. He does not want reluctant disciples or those having no particular desire. He wants a person willingly and with no compulsion to surrender himself wholly to him" (Oleksa 2010:90). There can be no imposition of the Orthodox Christian history on to the history of the Aleuts, no forcing them to walk on the path to the Kingdom.

Perhaps for this reason, Innocent seeks, despite the extensive talk of suffering, to bring a sense of the life-giving power of the encounter with Christ. At the heart of his message there remains the proclamation of a resurrection faith. The aim of bearing the cross and following the path of Christ is always life in Christ in its fullness. In a further indication of his attention to the reality of his listeners, one of the key aspects of the *imitatio Christi* (Oleksa 2010:98),⁸ which Innocent urges, is imitation of Christ as healer, as the bringer of medicine for our souls and bodies (Oleksa 2010:100–101 and 95–96). This Christ, who restores us to fullness, is the true shaman, who can alone guarantee well-being.

This restoration is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit (Oleksa 2010:100–101). Here, again we see what Innocent brings from his own Orthodox tradition, which, however much it may have neglected the Spirit in its academic theology at this time (see Arzhanukhin 1999:567–574 and Deicha 1999:575–583), had never lost the presence of the Spirit in its liturgical life. For a people for whom the spirit world was so real, understanding the power of the Holy Spirit was natural. Thus, again, the worlds of Innocent and his hearers come together in a shared story, with a message of hope and potential liberation.

The Task of the Missionary

Before moving on to consider the reception of Orthodoxy in Alaska, I wish to examine briefly another short document that Innocent produced, somewhat later than the "Indication." This is a letter to a priest going to Alaska, which

8 The use of *imitatio Christi* is not unwarranted – the first book that Innocent records having read in Alaska was Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* – see Mousalimas 1993:4.

Innocent wrote in 1853, the year when he moved back to Russian Asia from Alaska (Oleksa 2010:238–250).

The letter is a remarkable work of contextual missiological thinking, and reflects accounts of Innocent's own methodology, as already suggested above. It begins with comments on the spiritual duties of the missionary, which should have their starting place in a life of prayer (Oleksa 2010:239, 1).⁹ He also on several occasions stresses the need for simplicity, in attitude, lifestyle and language (Oleksa 2010:239 (2), 243 (13), 247 (35)). This is part of his insistence on what today we might call a theology of *missio Dei*, that all human mission begins with and is carried out through the mission of God, the Father from whom comes the Son and the Holy Spirit (Oleksa 2010:239 (2)). Also important is love, both for the message proclaimed and for those to whom the missionary proclaims it (Oleksa 2010:240 (5); 247 (34)). Here it is worth noting Innocent's very first sermon on arriving in Unalaska, preached on 28 October 1824 on the gospel text for the day, emphasizing the need to "love your enemies and return good for evil, not only without bearing any grudges, but with love. This is the highest and most useful Christian virtue, a Christian's distinguishing trait..." (Mousalimas 1993:4).

He also suggests the way in which the gospel should be proclaimed, beginning with the Ten Commandments, then going on to convince the listeners of their fate if they do not accept the Gospel, before telling them the story of Jesus. The preacher, he says, is

[t]o try to lead [his listeners] to a feeling of repentance or of something nearly akin to it. This can be accomplished by convincing them that they will inevitably be punished for disregarding the law written within their heart, in this life and the next, or if not in this life, so much more heavily and for all eternity, in the next... (Oleksa 2010:242 (12d)).

This is not a traditional Orthodox approach, but perhaps owes more to the influences from the West on Innocent's education. It should also be noted that, in practice, Innocent also stressed the presence of God's saving love, so that repentance is not to occur through fear, but through desire to turn to the love of God.

Further evidence of the desire to respond to indigenous customs and practices is seen in the conditions which Innocent lays down for those who seek baptism. The first condition is that the new convert should no longer listen

9 The numbers in brackets after the page number refer to the subdivisions in the text.

to shamans, though this is somewhat tempered by the second condition, which says only that the convert "should not observe any customs contrary to Christianity" (Oleksa 2010:246 (21)). Although there was undoubtedly resistance to Orthodoxy among some peoples, especially the Tlingit (see Kan 2001:187, 191; Kan 1985:215), these comments do suggest how Orthodoxy sought to find a way to allow space for the maintenance of traditional beliefs, at least in as far as these were not in direct contradiction to the gospel. This is a more strongly affirmative practice than simply allowing everything that is in full accord with the gospel, since it includes room for traditions that are not covered in the Bible, hardly surprising given the very different climatic and cultural settings.

This attentiveness to native Aleut beliefs and traditions is seen also in the Valaam document, where an account is given of the creation myth of those whom the first missionaries encountered. Certainly one can see the compilers of this document struggling with the twin desire of affirming the indigenous culture and wishing to pronounce the essential superiority of Christianity (and to some extent at least of European culture). But it does note that "the pure and elevated moral ideas of the Aleuts and Kadiaks and their religious views are in essence similar to the Bible stories" (Oleksa 2010:71), something that it attributes to the fact that all humanity stems from Adam and Eve.

Innocent's missionary instructions are not, though, some kind of Orthodox precursor to liberal Protestantism, affirming uncritically the ideas of modern society and of progress. Rather, a strong Orthodox current of what now we would call contextualization underlies the document. It is contextual because it recognizes the particularity and the particular good of the native culture, and it is Orthodox because it recognizes the presence of God at work creating and causing and sustaining this good. The second part of the letter on mission draws out these aspects very strongly, marked as it is by a sense of flexibility and adaptability that belies claims that Orthodoxy is imprisoned by tradition.

One good example of this can be seen in what he writes about keeping rites and fasting. On the first he says "some allowance should be made for new converts, as regards certain imperfections in the rites, partly in consideration of local conditions, partly in expectation of their growing firmer in the faith and the new mode of life" (Oleksa 2010:245 (17)). This is a remarkably free statement. Ritual is not the be-all and end-all of Christian life for Innocent, and he recognizes that to condemn people for doing what conditions do not allow is pointless. Moreover, by having patience with them, they will be encouraged to grow stronger in faith, rather than being alienated by impossible conditions. It is definitely more carrot than stick.

A similar approach is seen in his remarks on fasting (Oleksa 2010:245 (18)). Because "the nature of those countries [Alaska] makes it almost impossible

for the inhabitants to observe the fasts after the usual manner." it would be unreasonable, if not impossible, to suggest a vegetarian diet during fasting seasons. To do so would be to distract them from what is important and to impose conditions on them which they simply cannot keep. The main thing, for Innocent, is to inculcate in people an awareness of the reason for and importance of fasting so that they learn to reduce the amount they eat.

Also, no doubt bearing in mind that many of the peoples led hunter-gatherer lifestyles, which required them to be away catching food, he does not insist on unreasonable demands on church attendance (Oleksa 2010:245 (19)). This point is particularly important for anyone who wants to reduce Orthodox mission to ideas about liturgy. Of course, the liturgy is of paramount importance, but liturgy is never an end in itself, but always has, or should have, at its center the Triune God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Certainly, Innocent, on his travels, was always keen to visit the people and to see them in the church (see Mousalimas 1993 *passim*), but he is sufficiently attentive to their situation not to make impossible demands on them. Again, it is a mark of his desire to see a genuinely Alaskan version of Orthodoxy, where the laws of fasting and church attendance expected in other parts of the Russian Empire might be found inappropriate.

Again, Innocent is clear that for the gospel to be successfully indigenized in a form acceptable to the native cultures, it is vital that there be no inducements to conversion. It should instead be motivated solely by a desire to give one's life to the Lord (Oleksa 2010:247 (30)), and never by the potential for economic or material gain (Oleksa 2010:246 (24), 247 (29, 31), 248 (39, 41)). Missionaries are also expected to dwell alongside the people to whom they are preaching (Oleksa 2010:246 (26)) and make every effort to learn their language (Oleksa 2010:249 (43)), as Innocent himself obviously did. Most of all, though, there is an over-riding sense that missionaries are to be notable for their love and care for those whom they encounter (see various paragraphs in Oleksa 2010:245–249), both those who accept and those who reject the gospel (Oleksa 2010:248 (37)). For Innocent, the method of proclamation is always understood to be a vital part of the message that is brought. Time and again in the instructions he insists on honoring and respecting all that is good in the indigenous culture.

The Reception of Orthodoxy in Alaska

Innocent, one (rather hagiographical) commentator writes, considered "missionary work as teaching" (Yakimov 1999:626). It was, then, no accident that Innocent wrote a catechism, a work of instruction. The tradition in which he followed, of Cyril and Methodius, of St Stephen of Perm, can be summed up in

the word "Enlightener" (Ware 1999:557–564), to be understood as allowing the light of the gospel to shine in a particular setting. Innocent certainly did not regard those whom he taught as living in complete darkness. His journals and notebooks and letters are often filled with admiration for the lives, culture, and morality of the people among whom he lived (Garrett 1979:55–59; Mousalimas 1993:78–79). Innocent's "Indication" and teaching is part, rather, of a process of encounter. In coming to know the people, he draws on what he knows and has experienced of their lives and their way of seeing the world to bring to them a message of hope and encouragement. But the enlightenment is always in some sense mutual.

One of the most striking examples of this in practice is contained in a report from Innocent to his Bishop, Bishop Michael of Irkutsk, written in June 1828 (Oleksa 2010:132–135). This concerns his encounter with an old man called Ivan Smirennikov who lived on the island of Akun. He was considered by many to be a shaman. Hearing that Smirrenikov seemed to be blessed with the gift of being able to foretell the future, Innocent decided to meet him. Smirrenikov had been baptized by one of the early Valaam monks some thirty years previously, but had otherwise had little contact with priests. As Innocent describes their encounter, it becomes clear that he regards Smirrenikov as truly a man of God, worthy of respect, and someone to whom the people should listen. It is a rather beautiful illustration of what happened when two good people encountered each other, and testifies to Innocent's willingness to find good and God in the other.

A historian of the Russian America Company and the Russian presence in Alaska, David Nordlander, notes that "the [Russian Orthodox] church is the only living remnant from the era of Russian America" (Nordlander 1995:19). In many ways, Innocent was fortunate. The earlier problems and antagonisms between the missionaries and the Russian America Company which had beset the work of the first priests and monks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had disappeared, and the Company was required as part of its renewed charter to put a sum of money, equivalent to something in the region of \$5000 at that time, at the disposal of the church (Nordlander 1995:26). Thus there were no obstacles in the way for the expansion of the mission, but as Nordlander points out, it required someone with the dynamism, vision, and energy of Innocent to carry this through and to reach out to groups that had hitherto not been approached (Nordlander 1995:27).

Nordlander attributes a major reason for Orthodoxy's ability to become rooted in Alaska to the work of Innocent, and his ability to define the chief concerns of the mission, including the need to translate liturgical texts and

to train indigenous clergy in a seminary in the region (Nordlander 1995:20).¹⁰ This had a twofold effect. First, people could hear their own language in the church, and thus it was clear that this was something for them and not an imposition of a foreign power. Secondly, local people had to be involved in the work of the church, since they alone possessed the necessary linguistic competence to carry out, or at least, perfect the translation. Thus, the leadership of the church, certainly at the parochial level, was quickly indigenized and people could see that they were valued.

The way in which Orthodoxy and native Alaskan cultures have become intertwined has been studied by a number of anthropologists over the years. Medeia Csoba DeHass, an American anthropologist, spent fifteen months living in Nanwalek, a Sugpiaq Eskimo village in Alaska. The village is completely Russian Orthodox, and she reports a strong antagonism and hostility to any attempts to bring any other form of Christianity into the village. This behavior, in marked contrast to the normal non-confrontational character of relationships in Eskimo villages, "suggests that the Sugpiaq of Nanwalek interpret these incidents [of attempted proselytizing] as a direct threat to their religious life, and through that, to their ethnicity and self-identity" (DeHass 2007:207). Thus, "due to their personal and social history, the Sugpiaq of Nanwalek interpreted and integrated the once foreign Russian Orthodox religion into their stock notions regarding what 'Sugpiaqness' ought to be" (DeHass 2007:208). In other words, there is an integration of the tradition of Russian Orthodoxy into Sugpiaq culture, so that it is no longer a foreign or strange religion, but has become an integral part of how these villagers see and understand themselves as Sugpiaq.

DeHass also addresses the issue of pre-Christian beliefs. She notes that, although people were unaware of any pre-Christian beliefs, "[i]t is possible to recognize aspects of current Sugpiaq Russian Orthodox that correspond with pre-Christian ideas, and which are incorporated through the process of indigenization of Russian Orthodoxy" (DeHass 2007:210). This is seen most clearly in several practices associated with Christmas and the New Year, known as starring and masking festivals (DeHass 2007:210–213) and also in the way in which the structure of the church and people's roles within it are in close accord with what are thought to be pre-contact Sugpiaq norms (DeHass 2007:214–215). The very fact that these structures are so close is itself indicative of the way

10 The seminary remained in Alaska for 13 years from 1845–1858, when it was transferred to Yakutsk in eastern Siberia. It was restarted in 1972, offering classes from 1973, and is now known as St. Herman's Orthodox Seminary.

Orthodoxy was able to indigenize itself within the existing cultural practices and norms of the people, bringing both continuity and transformation.

Sergei Kan is a Russian-born anthropologist who studied in America and has worked with the Tlingit people and on Northwest Pacific cultures more generally over the past thirty years or more. He has also noted how the Tlingit "now often use Christian concepts to reinterpret their own past" (Kan 1991:364). This is seen especially in the way in which they have sought to access their pre-Christian religious past and to make sense of it in a way which gave status to the former shamans, as prophets of the coming of Christianity (Kan 1991:374–378, 380–381). The Tlingit initially proved more resistant to accepting Christianity, and it was only after a smallpox epidemic in the late 1830s that any headway at all was made (Kan 1991:366).

It was not, though, until the end of the century after the sale of Alaska and the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries that Orthodoxy began to take hold. In part, this was because "Orthodox Christianity, with its emphasis on ritual and the use of sacred objects, was much more susceptible to native reinterpretation and indigenization than the more cerebral Presbyterianism [whilst] the Russian church's greater use of the native language also attracted the more conservative Tlingit" (Kan 1991:368). Elsewhere, Kan shows how the Tlingit elders used the church brotherhoods within Orthodoxy "to strengthen their positions within the church and thereby establish a more balanced relationship with the Russian clergy and parishioners, to maintain the power and prestige of the aristocracy and to indigenize Orthodoxy in general" (Kan 1985:197).

Conclusion

The details of how the Tlingit elders indigenized Russian Orthodoxy need not detain us here, but what these examples clearly show is that the process of inculturation was one that took place mutually. That is to say, missionaries like Innocent Veniaminov translated the faith and practice of the Russian Orthodox Church into the languages and cultures of the peoples to whom they ministered, whilst these peoples in turn absorbed and, in so doing, indigenized and inculturated what they heard into their own experience, history, and identity. In this way the traditions merged so that there could be genuine recognition of the presence of the one tradition that united the cultures and the histories.

The indigenous societies, with their clear divisions of tasks and specialties as well as their ceremonial practices, proved fertile ground for the sowing

of Orthodoxy, with its rich symbolic tradition allied to its clear though never exclusive structures. Innocent adopted the language of his audience, both linguistically and experientially. The story he told was one that was couched in an accessible language. It spoke of a longing for happiness, as well as of the experience of suffering and disease and problems of depression and anxiety and the irruption of violence. Innocent presented another way, not subjugation to the Russians, but obedience to God, and despite some temptations, the two were never simply equated, in theory or practice. The fruits of this approach are seen in the way in which Orthodox Christianity has become a key part of the self-identity of the peoples of the region. Christianity is no longer part of a foreign history but their history, and the God of Innocent is now their God, the one God of all.

This study has shown that the ability of the Orthodox way of Christianity to become rooted in different cultures did not die out with Cyril or Methodius in the ninth century (Oleksa 1992:33–41) or St Stephen of Perm in the fourteenth century. It also proved effective in nineteenth-century Alaska. Theologically Orthodoxy is in a strong position to indigenize, however much it has struggled with the idea practically. This is because it has long had a very strong theology of creation (Oleksa 1992:59–61), which allows it to engage much more positively with the world than some western theological approaches. Figures such as Innocent combined the restless scientific curiosity of the nineteenth century with a firm belief in the presence of God who descends in Jesus to lead us back to fullness of life in the Godhead. Together with an apparently natural disposition to love the other whom he encountered, this enabled him to work among the peoples of the Aleutian Islands and the coast of Alaska. He was certainly a man of his time and culture, but he was also convinced that the real hope for the church of God in Alaska lay in its becoming a natural part of who the people were, allowing space for their history to be brought into the practices and language of worship and teaching.

The continuing vitality of Orthodoxy among some indigenous peoples in Alaska suggests that this is not of purely historical interest. It shows that Orthodoxy can (and therefore arguably must) be a missionary faith, allowing its rituals, icons, practices, and structures to be taken into different cultures, each bringing its own unique contribution to the one faith that Orthodoxy has always professed. Gospel and culture are not seen as mutually antagonistic or as utterly indifferent one to the other, but rather as story tellers engaged in sharing of their best. The Alaskan mission, it seems to me, is a story that deserves to be heard, and that can continue to serve as an inspiration today and in the future.

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