
UNORTHODOX ORTHODOXY IN BRITAIN

by Margaret Z. Wilkins (Independent Scholar and Researcher)

**A paper presented at the CESNUR 2013 International Conference in Dalarna University,
Falun, Sweden**

Please do not quote or reproduce without the consent of the author.

To start on a personal note, my first encounter with Orthodox Christianity was when I was a student and a friend persuaded me to join the Saturday evening choir at the Russian church near the university, which sang Vespers in English every week. My involvement there left me with an abiding interest in mainstream Orthodoxy, and subsequent acquaintance with an episcopus vagans, ordained into an independent church which drew on an assortment of Christian traditions, opened my eyes to the wonderful world of other not entirely orthodox Orthodox churches that since the middle of the 19th century have sprung up, split, died, mutated, and in some cases survived. This paper is a brief exploration of some of them and their relationship, or lack of it, to canonical Orthodoxy, which itself is changing as it becomes part of the mainstream of religious life in the UK.

Orthodoxy has been around in the British Isles for a long time – indeed, if you're a purist, it existed in Britain from the introduction of Christianity until 1054, when the Great Schism officially divided the churches of east and west and there was no longer one undivided church. As I hope to show, this concept of Orthodox rootedness is a powerful one in indigenous British Orthodoxy. More tangibly, there were links between Britain and Orthodoxy, especially the Greek Orthodox Church, from the seventeenth century onwards; Greek scholars and clergy came to study in Britain and the Greek business community that had settled in London built its first church in Soho in 1677. A church attached to the Russian

Embassy was founded in 1716, so there were then two ethnic Orthodox communities in London. But there were also contacts between Orthodox and Anglicans; in 1712, the Patriarch of Alexandria sent one of his archbishops, Arsenios, to London to ask for help for the Greek church under Ottoman rule, and this seems to have caused quite a lot of interest; Arsenios set up a Greek chapel in a private house (the community had been unable to maintain the Soho church) where he celebrated the liturgy weekly. He claimed in one of his letters that “many” English people asked to be received into the Orthodox church, and he did in fact receive some of them. Following his visit, in the years between 1716 and 1725, there were negotiations between the non-juring bishops and the patriarchs of the Orthodox churches, facilitated by Archbishop Arsenios, to try to establish union between them and the Orthodox churches, but it sounds as if the English clergy were rather surprised and shocked when they discovered some details of Orthodox practice, and the negotiations eventually came to nothing ((Langford, 1965).. As a coda to these English- Orthodox links, there is a probably unfounded story that in 1763 a Greek bishop visiting London consecrated John Wesley a bishop and ordained some of his lay preachers as priests.

Somewhere around the middle of the nineteenth century there was renewed interest in the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches, partly because the Oxford Movement was beginning to rediscover the Church of England’s roots in the history of the wider church, and partly perhaps because the world was already shrinking as railways ran across Europe and remote places were no longer so remote for the determined British traveller. The first English person that we know of to be received into the Greek Orthodox church apart from the unnamed converts claimed by Archbishop Arsenios., Stephen Hatherley, joined the Greek church in London in 1856 (Anson 1964, p53) . It was a bold step in mid-Victorian England, when Orthodoxy was still strange and exotic (Davies 1874, pp 348-48). He had an interesting career: he was ordained a priest in Constantinople in 1871, came back to England

and started a Greek chapel in Waterloo Road in Wolverhampton, went to America briefly to work with Greek immigrants, and ended up running a mission to Greek seamen in Cardiff (Hemmings 2010). He also gained a degree in music from Oxford, and published *A Treatise on Byzantine Music* in 1892.

John Mason Neale, an Anglican priest and scholar, not only wrote a history of the churches of the East, but published a remarkable series of translations of ancient hymns, Latin ones at first but then in 1862 Greek ones from the Orthodox church, the first time an English-speaking audience had had access to them, he also translated a number of eastern liturgies into English. In 1864, he and others founded the Eastern Churches Association with the aim of praying and working for the reunion of the Anglican and Orthodox churches. Another scholar, Joseph Overbeck, a German living in England, took a more direct approach; he converted to Orthodoxy himself in 1864 or 1865, being received in the Russian Embassy church in London, and shortly afterwards proposed that Western members of Orthodox churches should use a western form of worship; in 1871 he published his proposed liturgy, based on the Tridentine mass but with Orthodox additions (Abramtsov 1961). It was approved by the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, but the idea of a Western Orthodox Church foundered, though it left a legacy in Western Rite Orthodoxy, which still survives in various forms.

But while all this was going on in England there was – apparently at least – movement from the other side of the divide between east and west. In 1866 the imposing figure of Mar Julius, Syrian Orthodox Bishop of Iona, appeared in London, announcing a mission to establish Oriental Orthodoxy in the West. Mar (the Syrian title for a bishop) Julius was born Jules Ferrette into a French Protestant family, converted to Catholicism, became a Dominican priest, and went out as a missionary to Syria. There he reverted to Protestantism, and, according to his own account, was consecrated by the bishop of Homs, with the approval of

the Patriarch of Antioch, head of the Syrian Orthodox church, as a missionary bishop to reintroduce Orthodoxy to the west. His Catholic Apostolic Church of the West was announced as one in which Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants and Anglicans could all worship together in good conscience (Anson 1964 pp.33-9). He caused quite a stir among some of the more excitable members of the Oxford Movement, but doubt was soon cast on his genuineness and he dropped out of public view.

However, his model of the self-proclaimed and decidedly eclectic Orthodox church proved a fruitful one, at least on a small scale, and from the 1870s onwards there are two streams of Orthodoxy in the British Isles, one the canonical ethnic Orthodox churches, growing over time with immigration from their countries of origin and more recently attracting indigenous British converts, and the other the freelance churches which modelled themselves on what they understood as Orthodoxy but with a variety of added ingredients. Mar Julius himself was the precursor of a whole bunch of bishops who claimed to have been ordained in interesting, and sometimes not altogether clear, circumstances, and presided over a proliferation of new churches, some of which labelled themselves Orthodox among other things. On the whole the churches were very small, but their titles were often very grand.

One of these churches is the one which has been known for at least part of its history as the Celtic Orthodox Church, not to be confused with the Celtic Orthodox Christian Church, which is actually based in Akron, Ohio, or the Holy Celtic Church, which claims to possess “valid lines of apostolic succession through the Order of Corporate Reunion and other valid eastern and western apostolic lines.”. (This incidentally points up one of the difficulties of dealing with these churches – they tend to have names drawn from a small pool of words, so their names overlap, as well as being liable to change frequently.: in fact since this paper was

written a few weeks ago it appears that the Holy Celtic Church has now split into the Holy Celtic Church and the Holy Celtic Church (Mission of St Gall)). The Celtic Orthodox Church was descended from Ferrette's Catholic Apostolic Church, via an Anglican clergyman, Richard Williams Morgan, whom Mar Julius consecrated as Mar Pelagius, Patriarch of the restored Ancient British Church, in 1874 (Anson 1964 pp44-5). Mar Pelagius was also a passionate advocate of Welsh culture and one of the organisers of the first national Eisteddfod in 1858 (his bardic title was Mor Meirion), so there was an authentically Celtic strand to it. . It survives to the present day, though with an interesting twist to which I shall come back shortly.

One of the characteristics of these churches is their determination to show how legitimate they are; I have already quoted the Holy Celtic Church's claim to possess a number of valid lines of succession (its pre-split website, now unfortunately vanished, claimed "more than forty" and invited anyone interested to contact the website for a full list). And I have a copy of the Catholic Apostolic Church Chronicle of April 1966 which lists the four "jurisdictions and traditions", three of them Oriental Orthodox, it combines (p 7). It also features an article "From our Patriarch", signed by Mar Georgius, Patriarch of Glastonbury, Prince-Catholicos (p 3). This was the enterprising Hugh George de Willmott Newman, who from 1944 onwards built up a small religious empire, the Catholicate of the West, by linking his own Old Catholic Orthodox Church with a number of other similar churches, and collecting all the lines of succession he could (Anson 1964 pp 443ff, Bain 1985 p.91-2).

A few years ago in Glastonbury I attended a service held in St Patrick's Chapel in the grounds of the abbey. It turned out to be a very nice example of freelance Orthodoxy; the priest was (as I understand) a former Anglican vicar who had left the Church of England over

the ordination of women. The liturgy seemed Orthodox, but it was interspersed with familiar English hymns. At communion the priest announced that everyone present was welcome to receive the sacrament. He was assisted by a protodiakonissa, not a title you find in the traditional Orthodox churches any more than you find women taking part in the liturgy; it suggests that it was a spin-off from the Catholicate of the West, which instituted the order of protodeaconess in 1948 (Anson 1964, p465).

While all this colourful activity was taking place, the canonical Orthodox churches, originally formed by ethnic communities arriving in Britain, have been increasingly attracting indigenous converts: there are now some eighty churches in the UK worshipping in English which are listed in the online English Language Orthodox Church Directory, and even in churches which serve largely Greek or Russian speaking communities there is an increasing use of English in worship as second and third generations use English as their first language. There is a whole English-speaking group of seventeen parishes that forms a deanery of the European Archdiocese of Antioch, formed in the mid-90s by groups of Anglicans unhappy with such issues as the ordination of women and who wanted to move as communities, not be split up among existing Greek and Russian churches.

Orthodoxy is becoming naturalised in the UK, and as more people of British origin join the Orthodox churches, there is a growing sense of Orthodoxy having British roots. Where the non-canonical churches looked to ancient Christian places, such as Iona and Glastonbury, the converts to mainstream Orthodoxy tend to look to the saints, the Celtic and Saxon saints of the undivided church before 1054, and icons of those are now widely available. . As I was writing this paper I visited the Russian church of St Seraphim in Walsingham, and saw there an icon of Saints of the Northern Isles; and the Antiochian Deanery website quotes a 19th

century Greek saint as saying “When the Church in the British Isles begins to venerate her own Saints then the Church will grow.”

And finally, a twist in the tail of the history of Orthodoxy in the UK: In 1977 Mar Georgius, Patriarch of Britain, consecrated his nephew, who took the name of Mar Seraphim, as his successor as leader of the Orthodox Church of the British Isles, as the name seems to have been at that point (Bain p 170).. But Mar Seraphim made links with Pope Shenouda III, Patriarch of Alexandria, and in 1994 he and some of his clergy and laity were received in to the Coptic Orthodox Church. He is now Metropolitan Seraphim of Glastonbury, head of the British Orthodox Church, a small but entirely canonical Oriental Orthodox church, which proclaims on its website : “Our mission is to the people of the British Isles, and though we are completely Orthodox in our faith and practice we remain British in our ethos and in our appreciation of the Orthodox heritage of these islands” It is not quite the end of the story, as those who did not join the Copts remained as the Celtic Orthodox Church. Some of those who had been received into the Coptic Church in 1994 returned to the Celtic Orthodox Church three or four years later; but more recently there have been other defections to mainstream Orthodoxy, this time to the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate; and no doubt there will be further developments.

Bibliography:

Abramtsov, David F. (1961). *The Western Rite and the Eastern Church: Dr J.J. Overbeck and His Scheme for the Re-Establishment of the Orthodox Church in the West*. MA thesis,

University of Pittsburgh. Accessible at URL

<http://www.anglicanhistory.org/orthodoxy/abramtsov.pdf> Accessed on 4th July 2013.

Anson, Peter F. (1964). *Bishops at Large*. London: Faber and Faber.

Antiochian Orthodox Deanery in UK: URL <http://www.antiochian-orthodox.co.uk/>

Accessed on 4th July 2013.

Bain, Alan (1985). *“Bishops Irregular”*: *An International Directory of Independent Bishops*.

Bristol: Alan Bain.

British Orthodox Church; URL <http://britishorthodox.org/> Accessed on 4th July 2013.

Catholic Apostolic Church (1966). “Chronicle”, April 1966

Celtic Orthodox Church: URL http://www.orthodoxie-celtique.net/index_english.html

Accessed on 4th July 2013.

Davies, C Maurice (1874). *Unorthodox London: or phases of religious life in the metropolis*.

London: Tinsley Brothers.

English Language Orthodox Church Directory: URL <http://www.englishliturgy.org/directory>

Accessed on 4th July 2013.

Hemmings, Jonathan (2010). “The Inspiring Story of Fr Stephen Hatherley – English

Orthodox Pioneer.” Accessible at URL <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/42985.htm> Accessed

on 4th July 2013.

Holy Celtic Church: URL <http://www.celticsynod.org/celtic.htm> Accessed on 4th July 2013.

Langford, H W (1965). . “The Non-jurors and the Eastern Orthodox”. Paper read to the Fellowship of

St Alban and St Sergius. Accessible at URL: <http://anglicanhistory.org/nonjurors/langford1.html>

Accessed on 4th July 2013.

