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COMING INTO ONE'S OWN AMONG STRANGERS AT HOME

Living Orthodoxy in Today's Germany

Corinna (Cornelia) Delkeskamp-Hayes, raised mainline German Protestant, grew up and studied mostly in Bonn. She taught as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Pennsylvania State University before she and her husband Michael started a family in Germany. Baptized in the Serbian Church on the day of St. Kornelius of Komel by Abbot Basilius of the Skete of St. Spyridon in Geilnau in 1998, Cornelia presently works as a private scholar, presenting papers in Europe, the US, and China. She also serves as editor of *Christian Bioethics—Non-Ecumenical Studies in Medical Morality* and on the editorial board of the *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*.

RTE: Cornelia, coming from a Lutheran background, how did you learn about Orthodoxy?

CORNELIA: For me, 'learning about' was not the problem. My best friends, Susan and Herman Engelhardt¹, with whom I have been working professionally for many years, had become Orthodox eight years before and been talking into my deaf ears ever since. My own life, however, was deeply involved on all levels, from children's service to county government, with the local Prot-

1 H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr. (baptized Herman), MD, PhD, Prof. Emeritus of Baylor College of Medicine, Prof. of Philosophy at Rice, both in Houston, Texas, is widely known for his many essays, books (among them "The Foundation of Christian Bioethics"), book series, and journals, covering a wide range of subjects, from philosophy to bioethics and Orthodox theology.

Opposite: Regensburg Skyline.



*Corinna (Cornelia)
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estant community. Although I already found myself at the more ‘theological-substance seeking’ margin of that social group, I was convinced that no self-respecting German changes his religion. (To me, switching religions was like switching professions, husbands, lawyers, doctors—it sounded too “American”). I was more worried about upsetting my collected ancestors in their Protestant graves than my own salvation.

To be sure, I had always realized my lack of close contact with God. I fantasized about a treasure chest hidden somewhere, where the real Christianity could be found. I knew, one day I would want to find it and open the lid. I literally prayed: “Lord, come and reveal Yourself—but stay at arms’ length, so as not to unsettle my happy life.” Well, He responded. Major trouble in my family plunged me into survival-prayer.

It was at this point that I had those odd experiences no one in my Christian environment could make sense of. At times, during the kind of desperate prayer that takes possession of one’s whole being, when my ego was utterly crushed with the evil of my self-idolization revealed in its destructive impact on others, when allowing myself to face my utter nothingness (and I have to add that such daring, as I later learned, was possible for me because I was so securely nested in my husband’s love, that is, I did not have to ‘stand on my own feet’ protecting myself, so I could permit my grief to cry out in full vigor). At such times I felt that something at the bottom of the well held me, like a protecting hand, and I sensed the overwhelming power of a love that had been there, waiting for me as joy overflowing the very vessel of my suffering. I asked my friends about this, but nobody understood, or knew the experience. Everyone tried to reassure me that God does not want us crushed, and that I was getting something wrong. I finally had my hormone status checked, almost convinced that some physiological midlife transformations were driving me crazy and should be fixed. But the hormones were fine.

The other thing was even stranger: while I was thus exposed to something profoundly unsettling, I ran into a temptation which, although embarrassingly ridiculous in itself, required all my powers to struggle against. This was worse. How could I have such transforming encounters with what I feared and hoped was a real live Divine love (even if His way of affecting me, if it really was Him, didn’t fit any theological framework at my disposal), and yet

at the same time be touched by what even I recognized as utterly evil? All of this alienated me even more from my Protestant home culture as well as from the Catholics with whom I was professionally engaged, or had become friends with, because our children went to a Franciscan school with a monastery attached.

When the Engelhardts had a few hours of plane layover in Frankfurt some months later, I exasperatedly gave them the whole picture. They just looked at me in silence (a miracle in itself) and I sensed that they knew. Half a year later, they squeezed a three-day missionary invasion into their busy schedule and overcame my resistance by sheer loving determination. In the end they left me with an icon of Christ, a prayer book, and the order not to go anywhere, but wait for further orders.

RTE: They didn't want you to visit an Orthodox service on your own?

CORNELIA: As good friends, they know my many weaknesses. They also know how difficult it is, especially for Protestants, to stomach what, from the outside, seems to be Orthodoxy's exclusivity and rule-consciousness. Even worse, German Protestants tend to live in a haze of human dignity and self respect, and are quite likely to feel hurt, scandalized, and rejected when confronted by less-experienced priests from other cultures. So they wanted to be careful of my first encounter with Orthodoxy.

While at a conference in Freiburg, they asked a young Orthodox man who "seemed right", where he "went to fill his batteries". His spiritual home was the Skete of St. Spyridon at Geilnau, with its Swiss abbot, Fr. Basilius, and a German monk, Fr. Paisius, and this is where they later sent me. So I had the great privilege of finding Orthodoxy among people who not only had roots in my own culture, but who patiently tolerated my intellectualism. (This young man, Johannes Sigel, still tells about the first Easter night we spent together at the Skete, and how horrified he was by my rambling away about Hegel after liturgy.) I first came to that holy place in spring of 1997, was baptized there in 1998, and have spent overnight visits there every month for confession and nourishment ever since.

RTE: Has your church life remained predominantly with German Orthodox communities?

CORNELIA: Not at all. There are very few of those in Germany, and, since we live in a village east of Frankfurt, the closest two are in Mainz and Würz-



Hieromonk Paisius, Abbot Basilius, Monk Nil. St. Spyridon Skete, Geilnau, Germany.

burg—too far away to attend regularly. Yet this turned out to be a blessing, because it gave me the opportunity to share church life with different ethnic communities.

I first tried St. Nicholas Church in Frankfurt, a Russian Church Abroad parish. It was a community of political émigrés who had fled Communist Russia at various periods, with their children and grandchildren. That was quite a homogenous group, and with my Protestant over-sensitivity and ego-centrism, and having been used to very outgoing hospitality, I interpreted their spiritual absorption and concentration on one another as unwelcoming.

So I tried the Greek Church, dedicated to the Prophet Elias. Here, during my very first liturgy, three little old black-clothed *yayas*, one after the other, got up from their wall seats and told me to sit down. As a monastery trained (arrogant) German, I stayed on my feet, of course. But their loving care touched me. During my years of growth into Orthodoxy, these Greeks

have been my teachers. I have learned from the patience with which they endured my know-better Phariseism, the kindness and superior humility with which they welcomed the zealot convert, and the ease with which very pious Greek “monastic-type” believers move among the more worldly faithful who make it to church just before communion!

Eventually, my (then still) non-Orthodox husband was ready to accompany me to church, but because he finds the Greek chanting too foreign, we went back to the Russians. Their priest, Father Dimitri Ignatiev, who had been ill during my first visits, was an extremely welcoming host, interspersing German readings and ektenias in his Church Slavonic. Moreover, the Russians, once they recognized us as part of their community, turned out to be just as loving and hospitable as the Greeks. This parish has seen increasing numbers of immigrants from the East, many of whom had not previously led an Orthodox life, and yet seem almost genetically disposed to fit in. Many of them are very poor, but they dedicate everything to the Church, and it is humbling for me to see their loving sacrifice. With the Russians, I enjoy the extreme discipline of prayer (no chairs!) and the intensity of a community devoted to every detail of the ritual, which is a great help for a beginner.

Since my primary spiritual home, the Skete of St. Spiridon, is under the Serbian Patriarchate, I also sometimes attend the Serbian Church in Frankfurt, which celebrates just about every major saint, even on weekdays. The whole congregation sings along, and their hospitality is overwhelming.

I have also gotten to know Fr. Stefan Anghel of the Romanian Church in Offenbach, an incredibly blessed “planter of missionary outposts” among the Romanians in Germany, who is very keen on inviting Germans into the church. We became friends at once. He had the boldness to transform an industrial hall into a church, although the ‘socialist’ city administration had refused permission. Whenever inspectors stopped by, he would show them his biggish “hobby room,” or “meeting place for friends,” while secretly constructing an entirely new semi-circular apse for the sanctuary behind the old iconostasis he had brought from Romania. He was quite accustomed to being penalized for building churches illegally in Romania, and the Germans were not going to stop him.

RTE: What is your experience of meeting Orthodoxy in so many different cultures and languages? Many English-speaking converts seem to only want services in their native language, and are not particularly interested in the mother cultures of Orthodoxy.



Shrine with relics of Sts. Berta, Rupert and Wigbert, St. Rochus Church, Bingen, Germany.

CORNELIA: I sympathize with the English-speaking converts. The way in which ethnic Orthodox groups in Germany cultivate their home language in Church, while surely important for recent immigrants and for the preservation of family identity, is a great hindrance to inviting the locals. Even if one can read Plato, Greek services are chanted with modern phonetics, and thus understandable only for those who can whiz through very complicated textbooks.

But ethnic Orthodox culture is a different matter: it offers a rich diversity of 'incarnate' approaches to Orthodoxy. Living within different ethnic churches has given me a precious opportunity to 'absorb' theology in a sub-intellectual way. I 'learn' not only from reading at home, but from immersing myself in these multifaceted ways of giving human expression to the life of the Church: how different people stand, cross themselves, bow, pray, look, sing, tame the wild two year-olds, offer coffee (tea, or slibovitz), welcome guests, ask for help, line up for communion, suffer through the very long Holy Unction services, squeeze themselves around the bucket of holy wa-

ter on Theophany, celebrate their church's feast day, feed their priests after liturgy—there is no end to it. In each of these instances, not only does the genius of a specific nation manifest itself in its sanctified form, but there is real synergy that becomes visible in these seeming externalities.

I am especially grateful for the way in which my own Father Basilius (I shun the term 'spiritual father' because I recognize my unworthiness to be his 'child'), as the spiritual son of both St. Paisius of the Holy Mountain and St. Justin Popovic, combines the tradition of Mount Athos with a deep Serbian piety. I am at home in each church, and I try to draw out for myself the riches of each tradition.

Another thing I am very grateful for is having "learned" to venerate relics. The monks of St. Spiridon's began taking me to holy places in the monastery's vicinity, where I tried to enter into what I saw them doing. Except for prayers, nothing was said. I remember one crypt which had been fenced off, with construction workers hammering away behind plastic curtains. Here my German boldness proved useful: I talked the workers into discounting their safety codes. When the fathers appeared, they even quietly withdrew. As we entered the crypt, Fr. Isidore quietly glided over to a stone-hewn coffin, and with his long and delicate fingers removed a cigarette packet, placing it very gently on some boards. This gesture burned itself into my heart. It had the tenderness of a monk who knows how to venerate.

German Orthodox Roots

RTE: Cornelia, how much of the material presence of pre-schism Orthodoxy is left in Germany, such as relics, saints' shrines, and churches? And how much of this early legacy is still recognizable in German people, culture, and customs?

CORNELIA: There are plenty of material remains. The whole South and West that was cultivated by the Romans (i.e. the areas inside the Roman *Limes* along the Rhine, the Mosel, and the Danube), later the areas of the Frankish dominion, of the Alemans and Bavarians, still later even the lands inhabited by the Hessians and Saxons—all of these are still richly dotted with pre-schism churches, saints' graves and relics (not even to speak of the many Orthodox saints whose relics were imported into Germany). Of course, much was destroyed during the Reformation, the peasant wars, the Thirty Years' War, the wars after the French Revolution, the two World Wars, and even

more by the rage for city planning in the years of German rebuilding and economic growth.

As to spiritual remains, they are connected with such remnants. Of course, Germany was exhaustively Romanized, beginning with the work of St. Boniface (where Rome was still somewhat of a protector of Orthodoxy) and continuing with Charlemagne's arrogant claim for a separate Western Christian empire of his own, irrespective of the existing Byzantine Empire. But there still exists some veneration of saints of the one, undivided Church in Roman Catholic rural communities and cities on their feast days, and I think that these traditions are being recaptured a little during the last, say, fifteen years. Thus, the martyrs attributed to the 'Theban Legion', along with Sts. Afra, Verena, Martin, various bishops of Trier, Cologne and Mainz, the missionaries from Aquitaine and Ireland, then of course St. Boniface and his relatives from England, and finally missionaries from the local population itself are still being celebrated. In the veneration of these saints and the local customs connected with their memory, an Orthodox observer will discern spiritual traces of the one Church.

RTE: How did the schism and the later Protestant reformation change the Orthodox ethos in Germany and Switzerland?

CORNELIA: Oh, dear, you are asking a rather tall order of questions for a short interview, but let me give you some glimpses of what stands out in my own mind as most relevant. As to the distortion of Orthodoxy, already long before the schisms, and from its very beginnings under Clovis, the first Frankish King at the end of the 5th century, the Frankish Church became quite politicized, i.e. an instrument for the power interests of the Frankish elite. Many of the conflicts Irish missionaries experienced in what later became France and Belgium (conflicts which also influenced later 'West Germany') had their roots in the rather worldly way that many of the Frankish episcopate subordinated the interest of the Church to the interests of their families. Also, sadly, although St. Boniface opposed those distortions and did magnificent work in Christianizing what later became middle Germany (which had not been civilized by the Romans), he also followed Rome in enforcing celibacy on all priests.

The political instrumentalization of the Church was brought to a peak through Charlemagne, whose synod of Frankfurt in 794 rejected the 7th Ecumenical Council against iconoclasm, getting it all wrong on the icono-

clast controversy because of an insufficient grasp of the Greek terminology involved. Also, in his quest for liturgical 'harmonization', Charlemagne replaced the commemoration of the traditional Gallic saints with those of the Roman calendar, thus losing touch with an important part of Germany's Orthodox roots. Like his Carolingian forefathers, he championed forced conversion efforts when trying to expand into Saxon, Aleman, and Bavarian territories. While we can't blame all theological distortions on these various stages by which the western Church separated from the East, these mounting changes eventually made German Christians unable to discern the original Tradition of the Church.

Now, leaving that sad story, we get to the sadder one about the Reformation. I only want to point to one major change, pregnant with future distortions, and that is the strong link between the secular government of those territories which, after the Augsburg Peace treaty (1555), and then again after the 1648 Westfalian Peace treaty, became Protestant. Here Christianity's religious concerns came to be increasingly merged with the states' secular interests. Unlike the Orthodox principle of *symphonia*, this encouraged a this-worldly understanding of the role of the church (balanced by a pietism which in turn became vulnerable to its moralizing transformation through the Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th century).

This model of integration into the secular state was extended to the Roman Catholic territories after the Secularization Act of 1803. In the course of the 19th century, the idea that various Christianities would function as agents of the state in offering educational and diaconal services gained prominence, and this idea framed the special German state-churches cooperation which has profoundly affected Germans' sense of what it means to be a Christian. To generalize, Germany belongs to those countries where Christianity, in the general perception of its members, is almost exhausted by law-abiding personal decency plus the willingness to advocate state funded social re-distribution.

RTE: How many Orthodox would you estimate there are in Germany, and how many parishes (of each jurisdiction) and monasteries?

CORNELIA: I have no brain for numbers, but Wikipedia says we have 1.3 million Orthodox out of 82.3 million inhabitants in Germany. The Greeks have 70 parishes, the Russians altogether 68, Serbs and Rumanians each 33, Bulgarians 4. This is not counting the oriental Orthodox. There are only three

well-established and recognized monasteries so far (although bishops are working on establishing others). Two of them belong to the Russian Church abroad: the men's monastery of St. Job of Pochaev in Munich, and its recent sister convent, the Skete of St. Elisabeth in a southern suburb of Munich. The third is "my" home, the Serbian men's St. Spyridon Skete at Geilnau.

RTE: Are there initiatives to promote a German Orthodoxy?

CORNELIA: The most important such initiative is surely the St. Spyridon Skete which uses German as its main language. But since most of its pilgrims are Russians, Serbs, and Greeks, languages are added in response to whoever enters the chapel. In addition, there are many local initiatives by both German and Serbian/Greek priests, and I have been involved (as organizer and speaker) with seminars organized by Father Johannes in Mainz (Russian Patriarchate) and several Russian Church Abroad parishes.

As is to be expected, there are German converts who feel particularly comfortable with convert priests, but at the moment, I think cultural 'cross-fertilization' is very important. Most convert German priests completed their theology studies in non-Orthodox theology faculties before adding on their Orthodox continued education, and they approach Orthodoxy with that kind of understanding—which is precisely what many German converts are seeking to leave behind. On the other hand, even for immigrant Orthodox believers such German priests are often very helpful, particularly when these new citizens are newcomers to Orthodoxy as well. They encounter psychological sensitivity, easy accessibility, and the lack of authoritarianism that is characteristic of a Western education, all of which seems to help some of these immigrants gather strength.

RTE: Cornelia, each culture has something unique that fits particularly well into the Orthodox ethos. What do Germans find attractive in Orthodoxy?

CORNELIA: You are asking two very different questions here. Let me begin with the second and start with the official Christianities. Like everywhere else, the Roman Catholics sense that they have lost something that the Orthodox still preserve, and they have even instituted a monastery in Germany that does everything in the Orthodox way (except for details like commemorating the popes and confessing the *Filioque*). So non-Orthodox who like ritual culture and beauty can go there, without visiting a genuine Orthodox church.

Our Protestants, until the recent cooling when they elected a divorced female bishop as head of their governing body, cultivated their own talks with the Orthodox. Both confessions have been extremely generous in supporting social service endeavors in Eastern countries, although with ecumenist strings attached. These strings also surround the loving hospitality both denominations extend to the Orthodox immigrants, allowing them to use their temples and helping them in many ways (as long as they keep celebrating in their nice exotic languages).

Then, there are the people. When I first turned to Orthodoxy, I was scolded by my Protestant pastor friends for indulging in the music, the beauty, the candles, the incense, the beards, the icons, the poetry. Many Germans (even in their Christian temples) have icons on the walls, and they play Orthodox music CDs. They will visit Orthodox Church music concerts. Their yearning for beauty touches their heart, but Germans tend to disown their heart. They access the beauty of the Lord's house as though it was an aesthetic experience, so they are not able to "take to heart" what they encounter there. And they are all prey to the general ideology which teaches that Orthodoxy is gender-discriminating, patriarchal, homophobic, undemocratic, un-enlightened, still full of secret service agents or people who collaborated with the Communists.

Given all of these difficulties, some come into Orthodoxy because they have been literally ripped from their social environment by a dramatic experience, and have found a caring priest. Others marry an Orthodox Christian whose ardent faith (in rare instances) draws them in. Some are inspired by ecumenical places like Chambésy to slowly inch their way into Orthodoxy. There are also the rare Protestant theology students who notice their problems with apostolic succession. Blessed are those with eyes to see and ears to hear (like my friend Matthias Zierenberg, who turned carpenter)—they can convert whole troupes of relatives. Some Protestants may notice the contrast between Holy Scripture, which always struck me as 'fire and sword' when I prepared the children's service, and what remained of that power during the service, like an extremely thin chicken soup with the same historical chicken re-cooked over and over. Some very quiet Roman Catholics come to a service or two and miraculously, stay. I fear, I cannot give you a very good answer because I know so few German converts.

In my own family, my daughter was impressed by my catechism teacher who, shortly after their friendship began, departed to become a monk in a

Greek monastery. This was one person who lived what he talked about, and eventually my daughter was baptized in the Lahn River. My husband, whose American experience with Presbyterianism had always kept him at a critical distance from the weak Protestantism in our village community, patiently endured the turmoil that a recklessly converting wife-aflame imposes on a family, and over the years slowly acknowledged that what Tristram Engelhardt and I kept talking about was (if nerve wrecking, still) correct. He became Greek Orthodox. My mother experienced Orthodoxy in our loving care during the last three years of her life, which she spent in a neighboring apartment. She had always adored the music, now she yearned for a forgiving Father. She was baptized by Father Basilus in our house, lying in her bed on Christmas, and her coffin stood in church on the day of the presentation of Christ in the temple.

Now as to the ethos Germans might have to offer when they eventually turn around—I think St. Justin Popovic once said that the German is hard to convert, but once this is achieved, since he tends to act on what he believes, he will Christianize Europe. Great vision! All we need is God to sanctify German efficiency, seriousness, willingness to serve, and ability to be single-minded. In the Orthodox churches I know, German converts take exemplary care of the building, chant, help with the trapeza, are reliable organizers. German non-Orthodox theologians have been dedicated scholars editing and translating patristic texts. German converts bring their moral integrity which, once redeemed from the temptation of self-righteousness, is a blessing. It is tempting to let your question point us Germans into a better missionary outlook: rather than complain that no German wants Orthodoxy, invite them to improve it. But the real problem is that we all must first be transformed before our talents can become helpful rather than disruptive.

RTE: As a former Lutheran, can you generalize about the difficulties of coming to Orthodoxy?

CORNELIA: Our culture highlights equality, Orthodoxy teaches us to take heed of differences. As a Protestant, I was used to seeing myself on a par with pastors; as an Orthodox Christian, I never forget that a priest is sanctified through his ability to preside over holy liturgy. So I encounter him, even in private, not simply as a fellow human, but I honor his office. This holds true even more so for bishops.

Another important difference concerns patience. German Protestants are pretty organized and everybody works hard at not letting others wait. As a result, everyone gets terribly impatient when he is forced to wait himself. In Orthodox churches, on the other hand, there is an almost triumphant readiness to suffer. For example, if one confession seems to take forever just before Holy Communion, the choir will patiently sing hymn after hymn, and the people will stand quietly waiting for the priest, absorbed in their own private prayer. One also waits for the bishop or the priest to bless the trapeza food after liturgy, and the priest waits for the people who said they wanted their child baptized but come hours late (if at all!). The Orthodox know that God's will invades every aspect of our lives.

Then there is obedience—a hard nut to crack for Protestants whose better selves were force-fed on a Kantian sense of human dignity that celebrates a supposedly rational autonomy. Then there is our culture's craving for authenticity, individuality, originality, creativity—all of the things a would-be Orthodox must bottle up while learning to humble himself, and let Christ within us absorb our authenticity, individuality, originality, and creativity.

Even the Protestant mindset in Germany has been truncated for centuries. First, there was the Enlightenment with its aftermath in the cultural and existential reconstructions of Christianity from Schleiermacher via Kierkegaard to Bultmann.² All of these visions discount God's personal condescension of entering into conversations, educational ventures, self-revelations with (first) His chosen people and (then) all human creatures generally, of literally becoming one of us at a specific point in time and place, this whole self-giving of the One Who is beyond everything, so as to make Himself accessible to anyone who will respond to the love into which He wants to draw us. Western theologians, once they settled for philosophically placing God into His own utter transcendence, became deaf to His being a Deity of three persons, Who personally wants to address each of us. A second reason for this truncation is the strong church-state link I already mentioned, also nurtured by 20th-century ecumenism. This ideology is advertised as securing a stronger unified presence of Christianity in an increasingly secularized world, through support for common endeavors like peace, ecology, and social justice.

² Schleiermacher taught that Christianity is just one vision among many alternative ones to a 'whole' which is even beyond personhood. Each religious vision thus becomes a private work of art. Kierkegaard castigated an externalized form of worship, and he thought that real faith must be limited to an authentic inside which one cannot determine without repudiating its divinity. Bultmann argued that Christianity, in order to realize its potential for reaching down into people's deep soul, must be stripped of all merely "religious", i.e. mythological manners of speaking.

I could go on explaining like this forever, but none of these circumstances account for the fact that all of those people I know, even when they see their lives in shambles, do not turn to prayer. Or if they pray, they do so without real repentance. Of course, I admit that conversion to Orthodoxy is extremely ‘costly’ for Germans. (When I turned around, I lost almost my entire social world.) European countries are much more homogeneous in their outlook on life. Anyone who tries to take God seriously finds himself immediately discounted from polite company as ‘fundamentalist’.

Of course, for me this was easy, because philosophers need no social life, my husband even prefers our privacy, and Susan Engelhardt (who became my godmother) ‘held my phone’ every week for well over a year to guide me around the initial traps. But how many people have such privileges?! In the Bible study group I lead for a priest who (having been trained by Uniates in Poland) likes the Church Fathers, it happens sometimes that a member breaks out in tears at what I tell them about Orthodoxy and says things like: “this is what I always yearned for”. But then—they live in a Roman Catholic village. Orthodox churches are at least thirty minutes away by car, far by German standards, and these churches celebrate in inscrutable languages. Those who are not entirely ‘religiously unmusical’ here are nested in Christianities that socially sustain their daily lives.

A further difficulty is the secularism that has infiltrated even ‘Christian’ milieus. Two women’s social groups, which had grown out of my theater work, hung on to me in spite of my strange new views. Dining with them, I have to listen quietly to their tales about their children’s various partners, their children marrying nice Europeanized Mohammedans, about their own divorces and subsequent new partnerships, and table ‘blessings’ involving a she-god. They all know what I believe, but it is an oddity which they kindly tolerate because they like me. The few real friends with whom I shared every step of my move into Orthodoxy never came along. At least the wife of my former pastor took the fact that I broke out in tears (when she told me about the ‘healers’ her esoteric sisters recommended for her final-stage cancer) as a reason to abstain from those ‘healers’.

But then, there are the prayers of Father Basilus and his brotherhood which keep me going. More Germans are flocking to the skete, and their prayers will work their wonderful effect.

RTE: When I came here a number of years ago, I had the impression that WWII had weakened Christianity and in fact had destroyed people’s faith.

It seemed that Hitler had redirected the faith of the German people to faith in the state and in himself, and when both were defeated, the extreme disillusionment carried over to their faith in God.

CORNELIA: I think I disagree to some extent. It is too easy an escape to blame the twelve years of Hitler's 'millenium'. Certainly, Hitler was a shock to many well-intending Germans, and yes, they felt utterly betrayed. But the Catholics were not deceived. There was a significant difference in numbers of party members among Catholic and Protestant milieus. Especially Reformed and Union Protestantism was already weak before 1933. Plus, after the war and well into the *Wirtschaftswunder* of the 1950's, houses of God in Germany were still full.

Indirectly however, I think you are right: When the generation of sons began to use their fathers' and professors' involvement with Nazism in order to dismount paternal authority in the sixties, and when a new culture of liberal hedonism was born, then Christianity was denounced as having failed under Hitler. Then what previously was believed to be the church became a merely human, political and social institution. Vatican II further weakened Catholic liturgical resources.

Moreover, even for those who took their Christianity seriously, the experience of Nazism seemed to prove ecumenism right, particularly among the various Protestantisms. The *Barmen Declaration* of 1934 resulted from a conference where different Protestant denominations had united in opposition to the evil régime. After the war, this experience of inner-Protestant cooperation inspired the would-be leaders to press for general unification, and with the 1971 *Leuenburg Konkordie*, they established common Eucharist and inter-celebration of Lutheran and Reformed pastors. As a result, the deep incompatibilities between different faiths came to be discounted, which encouraged a habit of no longer worrying about or attending to the specifics of any one faith.³

RTE: What do you think of real ecumenical dialogue, as opposed to compromise?

³ There were exceptions to this. For example, the Lutherans recognized that their fault under Hitler had not been a lack of interdenominational cooperation but a lack in faithfulness to their liturgical and dogmatic integrity, and a lack of seriousness in prayer. Unfortunately however, most of the Lutheran regional associations lost the courage to struggle against the ecumenist spirit of the sixties. The small groups who remained faithful have suffered the fate of all schismatics: they became more sectarian in spirit, thus attracting ever fewer theology students.

CORNELIA: Some hold that dialoguing is alright as a way to preserve external peace between those who think, believe, and value differently. The problem, however, is that these dialogues are often pursued in quest of a moral and religious unity that comes only at the cost of doctrinal trivialization. Even if they are not so intended, speaking with those of other faiths tempts participants into a gradual adjustment of terminologies and manners of approaching problems which compromise the clarity of the Fathers' theology. And if we remember that Church doctrine is not an exotic science for intellectuals but, along with the Church's prayers, a safety line that keeps our striving and yearning on the right path, then any seemingly trivial loss of the Traditional teaching offers an opening to heretical seduction. I think Christ was serious when he spoke about "not one iota", and many of our saints, as for example Maximus the Confessor, fought and suffered for the 'iota' that distinguishes the (correct) *homoousios* (equal nature) between God the Father and God the Son from the *homoiousios* (similar nature).

RTE: Wouldn't a legitimate dialogue involve reaching a very clear understanding of what each participating Christian group truly believes and where we agree and differ, and then putting forth the Orthodox belief, hoping that the Holy Spirit will eventually inspire the others to see it?

CORNELIA: Yes, this is precisely what the *Journal of Christian Bioethics*, for which I serve as one of the editors, pursues. Our subtitle is *Non-Ecumenical Studies in Medical Morality*. We invite theologians of each Christian denomination to lay out their sources and then derive their conclusions. The clarity this approach offers is a helpful protection against rash ecumenizing. But I think that in order to invite the Holy Spirit we must go beyond the academic play field. My own growth in Orthodoxy, particularly through my study of German saints and relics, has opened another dimension to me.

My mother was an art historian, and we used to travel to many historic churches. My special love was Romanesque frescoes, so, without knowing why, I felt drawn to those monuments which most clearly preserved the Tradition of an earlier period of Church unity. Later, it was the experience of relic veneration that raised my interest in saints who are alive and ready to strengthen us in our struggles. Only then did I understand what my godmother Susan had mentioned very early while trying to contain my theological theorizing: that reading saints' lives is a good way to really 'learn theology'.

Eventually, I was asked to organize a series of talks in the Orthodox Church

in Bad Nauheim, where the invited audience would mostly be non-Orthodox. Here I decided to attack precisely this problem of saint and relic veneration. In preparing for these talks, I came to realize that without St. Gregory Palamas' 14th century account of the Divine energies one cannot understand the holiness of relics.

Because Roman Catholic theology never accepted St. Gregory's noetic mysticism (as distinguished from the emotional mysticism of Western thinkers like Meister Eckhardt), already present in St. John the Evangelist (I Jn. 3:2) and even in David's Psalms (Ps. 35:10), that theology never attained a coherent account of the holiness of relics. The philosophical spirit informing their approach framed a mindset which rendered relics a matter for pious emotions. This same spirit also deprived them of theological resources by which they could have resisted the onslaught of the Enlightenment. This is why, I believe, that so many have lost interest in their treasures. Even if most Orthodox know nothing of St. Gregory, they are sustained by the prayer life of the Orthodox Church, which retained this traditional approach.

Now, coming back to right ecumenism: Speaking about, and visiting relics brings one into contact with priests, parish secretaries, sextons—many pious people. It is often a moving experience for them when they see how we Orthodox love and venerate the relics of those saints which our Church also recognizes, that is, relics which they themselves often do not even dare to seriously honor any more (beyond the externalities of occasional presentations). It is a service of love to show them how these saints bind us together, and that our unity lies in the Church of the first millennium. This ecumenical purpose, by the way, is also behind the Bible study group mentioned a while ago. For many years, twice a month, I have offered those very dedicated non-Orthodox Christians patristic interpretations for their Sunday readings. This is a wonderful learning experience for us all.

RTE: Do you also speak to Orthodox about the early tradition and relics in Germany?

CORNELIA: Yes. I want to awaken the migrant Orthodox to the fact that they are spiritually at home here. Germany was originally an Orthodox country, like all of Christian Europe. Of course uncovering this Orthodoxy requires penetrating through a distorting veil, as most of the written history of this area is from a later, distinctively non-Orthodox perspective. Once one digs into the original sources, a completely different picture evolves. One recog-

nizes how much Greek and Syrian wisdom came to Trier (one of the major missionary outposts) through that city's long standing trade relations with Lyon, the first bishopric in Roman Gaul⁴, as well as through the missionaries from Aquitania and Ireland, and the early monasteries (such as Marmoutier and Lérins) in later France, whose founders were taught by Egyptian ascetics. There is a lot to be discovered and we need the prayers of all the Orthodox in this country to ask these saints to help us re-Christianize Europe.

RTE: In your public work, do you also address the pluralistic secular worldview that we face?

CORNELIA: Yes. Because it is so difficult to oppose one's own culture, Herman Engelhardt and I have started a *Forum for Christian Spirituality in Culture and Bioethics* (FOCS). We invite Orthodox Christians for little seminars into our house, where we discuss chosen texts, such as Dostoyevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*, St. Basil's *On the Holy Spirit*, Pope Benedict XVI's *Regensburg Address*, or else subjects such as the notion of sin in bioethics, or the relationship between the state and the Church, and so on. In each case, we try to trace the ways in which Orthodoxy imposes a perspective for looking at our society and ourselves which is profoundly at odds with the ruling discourse within that society. It is very important for Orthodox in a heterodox, secularized environment to encourage and strengthen one another.

RTE: We hope to feature your and Dr. Englehardt's work on culture and bioethics in a future issue. In the meantime, what do you see as a realistic hope for the future of Orthodoxy in Germany?

CORNELIA: Future generations of ethnic Orthodox may eventually stop using the Church as a cultural identity safeguard. Also, some Germans may eventually notice those cradle and convert Orthodox who obey their spiritual fathers in concentrating on their own sanctification, so that the grace of God can become visible to those outside. While liberal tolerance is dangerous for those who are called to be watchful at all times, because it creates the illusion of an easy life, the European Union with its anti-discrimination regulations places ever more noticeable constraints on the integrity of Christian teaching and the freedom of Christian professionals and entrepreneurs.

⁴ Roman Gaul was an area of provincial rule in the Roman Empire including modern-day France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and western Germany. Roman Gaul lasted from 121 B.C. to 486 A.D. when it was taken by the Franks.

From the other end of the spectrum, Mohammedans are becoming more prominent in Germany; they will present a sizeable proportion of our population in the near future. Many of them will lead a comfortable, secularized life, tempting them to disregard their faith, but not all. Right now, the city of Frankfurt undiscerningly evinced its commitment to colorful religious pluralism in permitting a mosque to be built right across the street from our Russian Orthodox Church. Of course, we will try to establish a peaceful coexistence, especially since we should be united in taking God seriously, against our radically and aggressively this-worldly social environment.

On the other hand we will also do our best to keep the Turkish youngsters from further threatening our priests, that no one may be forced into martyrdom. Nevertheless, apart from the confessors who suffered in Rumanian and Russian prisons, and who are still living among us, there are martyrs right now next door: Father Daniel Susoyev of Moscow was shot by a paid killer last October, probably because of the many Mohammedans he baptized. Such saints present an example no Orthodox can entirely disregard. And surely, Orthodoxy has thrived wherever confessors suffered and martyrs shed their blood. ✦