

THE SUNLILIES: EASTERN ORTHODOXY AS A RADICAL COUNTERCULTURE

(GRAHAM PARDUN)

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It's time for a palate cleanser, a turn away from politics and from endless talk of the evil man does to man. Today our focus is a lovely and inspiring book of Eastern Orthodox meditations on prayer, revolving largely around the natural world as a manifestation of God's will and love. I have been saying at my own Orthodox church for the past few years, to some skepticism from the cradle Orthodox, "Orthodoxy is the coming thing!" And maybe I am right. After all, as the subtitle of *The Sunlilies* says, Orthodoxy offers a radical counterculture, and given that sweeping change is what our society needs, and will get one way or the other, Orthodoxy may well be a major part of building our future.

The book isn't about rebuilding society, however. It's about rebuilding the life of each of us. The author, Graham Pardun, is a young-ish Orthodox layman who lives in Minnesota. "I'm nobody special, though—just a man of my times, like anybody else." You might not think such a man a theologian, but among the Orthodox, that term carries a different content than in the West. For Western Christians, a theologian is a highly-educated systematizer, in the mold of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who elucidates to others the tenets of the faith. Among the Orthodox, however, a theologian is rather someone who is able to, in this life, commune with God in a manner "better" than that of most believers, usually characterized by humility and silence, and write down the fruits of that communion, often in an unsystematized way. Knowing God, not rationalizing about Him, is the main matter; one who is drawn to theology must first become "saturated with wonder," in the words of James Payton, and from that may flow elucidation. By this definition, though he would probably protest against the allegation, Pardun certainly counts as a theologian.

The author is one of several Orthodox laymen writers who have lately been receiving attention. (Pardun also writes at his excellent Substack.) All of these are converts; the most prominent is Paul Kingsnorth, who writes more politically than Pardun, often in opposition to what he calls the Machine, the monstrosity that has overtaken the West, although his

writing is also suffused with the awe that often characterizes Orthodoxy. I can't give statistics, but it is clear that Orthodox converts in the West are dramatically increasing in numbers. Whereas a decade or two ago, converts were rare, and usually tied to marriage, now they are common. Every week at my church several new people come to see what it's all about, and quite a few stay. True, this influx is balanced by the dying or drifting away of cradle Orthodox, often as they lose the ethnic ties that in America have bound the individual Orthodox to their churches. But on balance, it seems certain Orthodoxy will keep growing, as people search for a church that actually puts Christ first. The rise of important writers is a natural result of this change, and doubtless contributes to it as well.

That said, this is not a book written to convert. It is written for those who are already receptive. Pardun is not here to argue; he is here to show, to illuminate, to share the joy. "This is a book about Orthodoxy being a challenge to our culture's pervasive nihilism by being 'radical,' in the sense of getting back to our roots. I mean this in two ways: A return to the ancient path of Yeshua Messiah, the root of all human flourishing, and secondly, a return to the human body and its simple, but deep connections with the garden of Eden. For me, the image of a lily fluttering in the sunshine encapsulates both."

Given that I am always banging on about "human flourishing," achieving which is the stated goal of Foundationalism, this appeals to me a great deal. Certainly Pardun is correct that Christ is the root of all human flourishing, not the conquest of Space or changing the mechanics of our government. It is true that if we all lived simple lives, in harmony with God and his creations, this would be enough. But such lives will never be universal, both because man in his nature wants to achieve great temporal aims (and there is nothing wrong with this, if properly directed and channeled), and because we cannot ignore that some men do evil, to which we must respond. Still, to the extent each man and woman can move his or her life in the direction of simplicity and harmony, at least some of the time, it will be part of the puzzle.

This book is really three essays. We begin with "The Sabbath of the Heart," in essence a meditation about prayer. Pardun uses the Psalms (extremely important in Orthodoxy, more so than, I think, in any Western Christian tradition), to describe how the entire created

universe is a form of liturgy. In Orthodox belief, the Divine Liturgy, the core of Orthodox practice, is not something initiated by believers, with a beginning and end in human time, but “merely” believers joining an ever-ongoing Divine Liturgy before God’s throne. Pardun’s point is that the Divine Liturgy we celebrate is only part of the celebration; the entire universe is suffused with God in a “perpetual Cosmic Liturgy.” He aims to help us better participate in this liturgy.

Key to the Orthodox liturgy is participation—a foretaste of our ultimate participation with the energies of God, *theosis*. (It is basic Orthodox doctrine that the end of man, desired both by God and man, is infinitely coming closer to the energies of God, even though His essence will remain forever remote.) Participation in the Cosmic Liturgy, the perpetual Sabbath, Pardun says, should involve “wakefulness, surrender, and unity of breath.” As to wakefulness, “The Living God is all around us, but all we feel is God’s absence, our senses numbed by the anesthetizing cocoon of self-constructed worlds.” The solution, or at least a partial remedy, is “paying close attention to everything around us”—that is, everything in the natural world around us. As to surrender, the birds of the air, as Christ noted, “don’t bemoan themselves as tiny and helpless, adrift in a vast, uncaring universe—instead, they sing each morning to God, giving thanks for their lives, such as they are.” As to unity of breath, the point is that God’s breath, that is, God Himself, suffuses all things in every corner of the universe. His breath is not, as the Platonists and Gnostics would have it, confined to a divine spark within mankind, trapped until its release upon death. It unites all things in a “communion of love.”

If we realize these three key things, and merely sit quietly, wherever and whenever we are, not so much meditating on these realities as accepting and absorbing them, then we are truly at prayer. Such silent prayer has a long pedigree in Orthodoxy, with its embrace of hesychastic prayer, the contemplation of God, usually tied to repetition of the Jesus Prayer, in very rare cases leading to immersion in the Light of Tabor. This is not to say we should not also pray more formal prayers. “All spoken, whispered, or chanted prayers are a prelude to this prayer of silence. . . . If we sing or chant the given prayers, this is first of all a way of replacing the lonely, isolating chatter in our heads with words shared by the Church, our ancient fellowship of love; it is, secondly, a way to

transform our hearts into thrones of radiant silence, the life-affirming words replacing agitation with stillness, craving with patience, hatred with love, integrating us more and more fully with the great, living silence of the Cosmic Liturgy all around us.”

Pardun recommends praying outside if possible, oriented toward the East, and chanting or singing the prayers, and a variety of other practices, all toward actual performance of wakefulness, surrender, and unity of breath. (He would also have us pray barefoot, which sounds very hippie, but actually makes sense, at least if you don't live in San Francisco.) “If we, with God's help, honor these daily and weekly and yearly cycles of praise and thanksgiving in a simple, childlike way, cultivating the Sabbath of the heart and joining our voices to the voices of the Cosmic Liturgy all around us, then our human bodies—even if poor, hungry, and shabbily dressed—will become the True Temple of the Living God, as radiant as Yeshua's lilies, and more beautiful and more everlasting, by God's mercy, than any manmade temples of stone.”

The second essay, “Living Images of the Living God,” is hard to boil down, but essentially revolves around iconography, a fundamental part of Orthodoxy. For Pardun, the Hebrew Scriptures are of great importance, not just the Psalms, and in opposition to the idols of stone of ancient Israel's contemporaries, he draws a line from the vision of Eden, to the Orthodox forest churches of Ethiopia, and to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, venerating an icon of the Theotokos, the Mother of God, in the forest with a wild bear by his side. “Thus, sacred space in the Hebraic vision of life is first of all *not* a temple of stone, but Eden, a Living Garden planted by the hand of God. And thus, the calling of mankind as the kings and priests of God is first of all *not* the construction of stone temples and the orchestration of liturgies within them, but care for the wild things of Earth and the celebration of the Cosmic Liturgy with the birds and clouds and stars, and the walia ibexes and leaping dolphins. . . . [A]ll of these images, daisy-chained to one another by mutual participation, are transformations of the inner life of God into the outer life of all things. . . . Thus, to live the Edenic life is not simply to ‘go back to nature’ . . . but to dwell in nature like a priest does in sacred space, praising God like the birds and the trees do, cleansing the heart of all thoughts, the mind of all fear and egotistical craving, so that one can see and hear and smell and touch and taste God in all things.”

Pardun does not address this objection, but a frequent response to this type of claim is that the writer is advocating pantheism, that God in this conception is not a personal God, but merely a distributed God. This is nonsensical, of course. That God is in all things seems inherent in the fact that God is infinite (a basic doctrine that far too many people, even believers, seem to ignore in favor of a demiurge conception of God). Moreover, as Pardun does discuss, the image of the breath of God inhabiting and animating all things, not just human beings, is found throughout Scripture. Again, the idea of the Platonic spark is directly opposed to Christianity (and Pardun also rebuts the somewhat silly claim that early Christianity was overly infected with Platonism).

It is true we do not know exactly what all this means. It seems very likely to me that it means all sentient creatures are granted the possibility of union with God, which necessarily likely also means that “dumb” creatures are automatically, within the limits of their sentience, granted eternal life. Perhaps this is on my mind lately, as our own faithful dog nears the end of her life, at fourteen years of age. When she is no longer with us, soon, I hope she will be at play in the fields of the Lord, waiting to greet us. Farther afield, maybe there is more sentience in the universe (or all universes, for an infinite God can create infinite universes) than we realize. What, for example, if the stars are sentient? There is a theory that dark matter, the “plug” explanation for that the stars do not behave gravitationally in the way they should given the matter we see, is unnecessary—maybe the stars are simply choosing to move in a way we cannot understand, for reasons we do not understand. If the breath of God is in everything, why not?

And, finally, Pardun offers “The Communion of Love,” where he emphasizes the interconnectedness of all mankind. “In Orthodoxy’s radical vision . . . the universe is not a machine. . . . Rather, it is the self-revelation, self-embodiment, and self-offering of the Living God.” Our ultimate destination, we hope, is the Messianic Feast of Isaiah 25, the “eschatological realization of God’s kingdom, . . . a vast communion of people from all corners of the planet, [sitting] at one table and [sharing] fellowship with one another by eating a common meal.” The Eucharist is, naturally, a core part of this, part of “the New Creation, blossoming forth from the old.” Pardun again ties this feast and communion back to nature, to forest gardens that ideally each house and church should

have, such that “our churches and homes would be enveloped by Edenic sacred space,” a foreshadowing of the eternal Feast.

You will be enriched upon reading this short book. But putting it into practice is, as always, a little harder. For example, a crucial, perhaps the crucial, element of all these approaches to God is immersion in nature, and this strikes me as a big problem for city dwellers. It is easy enough for me; I just stepped outside and saw, among other wonders, clouds of yellow finches rising from the meadow and our nesting pair of red-tailed hawks swooping overhead. But what do you do if you live in a giant apartment building? When I lived in Chicago, years ago, I barely noticed the seasons, or the length of the days, and rarely saw anything green, or any animal but pigeons and the rat dogs carried around by wine aunts. Arguably cities, perhaps necessary for civilization, are inherently spiritually desolate; I used to think that I was a city person, but I have long since left that behind, and while I see the benefits of cities, it strikes me that at a minimum, a city-dweller should try hard to find ways to interact with the natural world. (This is one the reasons that allowing drug addicts and criminals to set up shop in city parks is a great evil.)

We should also be careful to distinguish immersion in nature, for the purpose of participating in the Cosmic Liturgy or even for less exalted spiritual purposes, from endorsement of Left agitprop, the “Green New Deal” or whatever anti-human program designed to hand total power to the Left is on today’s menu. Many churchmen do not; notably the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, who likes to be called the “Green Patriarch,” does not do a good job so distinguishing, and too often allows himself to be used as a tool by his enemies. I’m all for a vast range of policy programs to benefit and to recover the natural world, from small-scale farming to nuclear power. I’m in favor of William Wheelwright’s “ice cream nationalism.” But as we all know, most of the money supposedly spent on improving the natural world is either simply stolen, funneled into the political projects of the Left, to increase Left power and to engage in low-IQ virtue signaling (such as banning gas stoves). What is not is spent on dead ends like wind power and solar power (even if I am putting 70kW of solar power on my own property, solar is no solution to replacing fossil fuels), or does not actually improve the natural world. Meanwhile, nothing at all is done about grossly excessive use of pesticides, the degradation of our food

supply, or the nightmarish effects on health, and on male and female fertility, resulting from plastics, PFAS, and other compounds deemed essential to consumer ease.

Anyway, read this book (which you can't buy on Amazon, but can buy through TreeDweller Books). It's hard to do *The Sunlilies* justice in a summary; it's a kind of holistic experience, probably best done sitting outside. I don't think the thought in here is entirely original, nor would Pardun say it is. I can't say for sure, because the corpus of Orthodox writing is vast and I have read very little of it, but echoes of the writings of several Church Fathers show up here, and Pardun explicitly quotes not only some of them, as well as Scripture extensively, but also some modern Orthodox writers, especially Philip Sherrard. This is as it should be; Orthodoxy does not seek novelty, but Christ. And if you read this book, you will have more Christ in your life.