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FROM MOSCOW TO LINDISFARNE A Pilgrimage to the West

What happens when two Russian Orthodox university students go in search of early English and Irish Christianity? Anton Odaysky and Sonia Mikhaylova spent several evenings with the *Road to Emmaus* staff, giving us their impressions of contemporary English spiritual life and describing their pilgrimage to Celtic Christian sites in Northumbria.

RTE: Could you both tell us about your backgrounds, how you became Orthodox, and what you are doing now?

SONIA: I am twenty-one years old and I was born and raised in Moscow. I was fortunate because I was brought up in the Church and baptized as a child. Now I attend the Moscow Patriarchate's Russian Orthodox University where I study ancient Greek and Latin.

Top: Anton and Sonia

ANTON: As for me, I'm twenty-seven and I became a Christian several years ago when a completely unexpected experience of my soul confirmed for me that there is an invisible world. I turned to Christianity, but at first to Protestantism. Most Russian people feel a pull towards Orthodoxy because it is an integral part of the country's history, but this only developed in me later. Like Sonia, I am now Orthodox and study at the Russian Orthodox University of St. John the Theologian, in the faculty of theology and philosophy.

RTE: And how did you both become interested in Celtic Christianity? What started you on this wonderful pilgrimage?

SONIA: For me, it was through various classes that I took at the university. I wrote a paper on Lindisfarne¹ for one such class. I was particularly interested in the Celtic illuminated manuscripts and it was Penelope Minnie, a British English-language instructor at our university who suggested that I go to England and Ireland to explore Celtic Christianity.

ANTON: My first interest was in the writings of Venerable Bede², whose grave is in Durham Cathedral. But when we stayed at Marygate House on Lindisfarne, I understood that Celtic Christianity was indeed a very interesting theme, that it was a unique and ancient tradition.

RTE: Lindisfarne, of course, was the "Holy Isle," one of the great monastic centers of early Celtic Christianity, but what is Marygate House?

ANTON: Marygate House is an Anglican guesthouse where visitors to Lindisfarne can stay. It has guest rooms, a dining room, sitting room, and a library – actually the personal library of Kate Tristram, an English Church historian. Her wonderful library was the main purpose of our trip there. Ian Mill, the warden of Marygate House, is a very fine man and an Anglican Franciscan. He told us that he very much respects the writings of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, the Moscow Patriarchal Orthodox Archbishop of England. Although they've never met, Ian has read all of his works.

1 Lindisfarne (Holy Island) – Island off the coast of Northumbria, England, where St. Aiden (+651), the "Apostle of Northumberland" established a monastic center in the seventh century. His disciple, St. Cuthbert (+687) carried on the tradition, creating a "golden age of monasticism" on the island.

2 Venerable Bede (+673) - A monk-scholar from Jarrow who wrote one of the primary sources of English Christian history, *The History of the English Church and its People*.

RTE: How did it come about that you went together? Was it part of a study program?

SONIA: It was Anton who had the idea that we go to England to learn more about Venerable Bede, but it was Penny Minnie who suggested that we also go to Lindisfarne.

ANTON: You see, I am originally from Yalta and when I became Orthodox my parish was the Romanovs' home church at the Livadia Palace, where Tsar Nicholas II and his family used to spend their summers. Our Orthodox society there was involved in work with the Church Mission Society (CMS), a Christian organization connected with the Anglican Church. Sonia's instructor, Penelope Minnie, and her husband are involved with this organization also, so we had several friends here. Because of my interest in Venerable Bede, and knowing Sonia's interest in Celtic Christianity, I asked our friends to help us gather the necessary documents to study at Lindisfarne. CMS gave us this opportunity and arranged everything. We spent four weeks, mostly in Northumbria, a very interesting corner of Great Britain, where there was much missionary activity of the early church, and where Venerable Bede worked. We also had shorter visits to London and Cambridge, traveling by car, bus, train and on foot. Colin Darling, who was the organizer and overseer of our CMS-sponsored trip was wonderfully hospitable and very kind, as was Mark Oxbrow, one of the directors of CMS, whom we stayed with in London.

RTE: Who did you meet along the way? Were there any English Orthodox interested in Celtic Christianity, or was it mostly Catholics and Anglicans?

ANTON: We didn't meet many English Orthodox Christians, although we did go to visit Metropolitan Anthony Bloom. Later, I heard that an Orthodox parish had come to Lindisfarne, but I don't believe that is very common. Many of the Orthodox probably come from Greek, Russian, or Serbian ethnic parishes. However, we did meet some very good Anglican historians, Ray Simpson, and Kate Tristram whom I mentioned a moment ago. We interviewed both of them, and met other interesting people as well.

I lived in Ray Simpson's house at Lindisfarne. Ray is an Anglican priest, a historian and the author of a number of well-known books on Celtic Christianity. One day he had a guest visiting him – a Methodist pastor from the United States, who was also interested in this subject. To be honest, I



was very surprised because I know this denomination and never thought Methodists would feel as close to Celtic Christianity as the Orthodox, Anglicans and Catholics do. We also met another Methodist pastor, who has organized a retreat house at Lindisfarne. Ray had other friends visit while we were there, including one who had just returned from the Iona Community, where he had spent several days participating in an Orthodox retreat devoted to Celtic Christianity on Iona Island³.

SONIA: In the Northumbria Community we also took part in a retreat devoted to monastic disciplines and the roots of Christianity. Roy Searle, who ran this retreat was talking about the Holy Fathers and Mothers of Egypt. As I understood, many people there feel a close connection between Celtic Christianity and the ancient Egyptian desert Christianity. In this way it was very close to Orthodoxy.

RTE: Of course, from our Orthodox viewpoint, we see Celtic Christianity as an Orthodox phenomenon, and the Catholics would see it as an early form of Catholicism. We were all one church in the first millenium.

ANTON: According to Venerable Bede, there was a confrontation between these two branches from the beginning: the Latin Church and the Irish Church. It seems to me that people in England are interested in Orthodoxy today because they see that Orthodoxy has preserved the most treasured parts of Celtic Christianity that are very dear to their souls – such as, the attitude towards the Holy Trinity, saints, nature....

RTE: Did you meet British people who also felt the connection between Celtic Christianity and Orthodoxy? Did anyone ask you about it?

ANTON: We understood that Orthodoxy was not something to be preached about, but it could be shown. Just saying that we were Orthodox didn't mean much to people who weren't familiar with the details of our traditions, but when someone asked about our prayers and services, for example, we tried to explain. One evening we were having supper at an Anglican friend's house and he asked me to explain an aspect of Orthodox tradition. I tried to do

³ Iona Island - Holy island off the shores of Mull in Western Scotland where St. Columba (+597) founded a spiritual community after leaving his native Ireland.

so, and when I finished, he said: “Oh, it’s Celtic!” He also asked me about the Russian monasteries, and in his library, I found several of the St. Herman Brotherhood Press books about the Optina Elders. Later, we also heard that one of the communities whom we stayed with had a long discussion on Orthodoxy amongst themselves after we left.

As far as our talking about Orthodoxy, we never told them things that we were afraid might shock them. For instance, the length of some of our services, particularly during Great Lent – hours and hours of standing. And that some people don’t eat for several days at the beginning and at the end of Great Lent. Things like that.

RTE: What was your experience of the worship and church attendance in England?

ANTON: Anglican people in England told us that many people want to be Christians outside of an organized church. They don’t understand that this is not normal for the traditional Church, and because of this many of the priests are trying hard to make their services more understandable for people – shorter and with prayers in a more simplistic language, and sometimes with things like puppet plays in place of a sermon in family liturgies.

SONIA: Of course, there are also many who are far more conservative and serious about tradition as they know it. Also, I don’t think that different forms of outreach are wrong. In the Orthodox Church we have such a rich tradition and complex services that not everyone can understand them immediately. It takes some study, and because of this some people don’t want to commit themselves. I feel that we Orthodox also need to have more outreach to try to draw them in.

RTE: Even though there may sometimes be superficial and emotional aspects involved, don’t you think that English Christians who are actively seeking Celtic Christianity are really looking for a deeper commitment to their faith?

ANTON: We think that the world as a whole is losing real spiritual life, and so you see the interest in certain New Age and Eastern religions, because people are looking for something deeper. Some of them feel that Celtic Christianity has the mystical element they are searching for. People in Lindisfarne

Opposite: Ruins of Lindisfarne Abbey.





told us that what is normal spirituality for Orthodox Christians – praying and expecting God’s help, even in miraculous ways, the Jesus Prayer, and our older traditions of monasticism – seems very mystical to many Western Christians.

RTE: So, even romanticized notions about Celtic Christianity may be a door for spiritual seekers who are coming closer to Christ.

ANTON: Yes. They could be, if they don’t veer off into individualism. I believe that for Westerners, a serious study of Celtic Christianity is a step towards traditional Christianity.

RTE: One of the things to be very cautious of in studying Celtic Christianity, of course, is the rather eclectic, and even New-Age elements that creep in when people try to “reconstruct” it. Did you come across this non-serious aspect, as well?

ANTON: Yes – people dancing on the site of a former monastery and the like. Of course, the historians we spoke to didn’t claim that these practices were rooted in the original Celtic Christian tradition. The people who do liturgical dancing and write songs in the “Celtic tradition” see prayer as having various aspects: praying with your voice, praying through dance, and so on, but this is more to do with emotions and feelings, and not part of the historical study. Ray Simpson told us that there were two dangerous things in researching Celtic Christianity. The first is keeping to a dry academic style highlighting excavation and research, while the second is romanticizing the Celtic tradition by concentrating on the nature aspects and what appeals to the emotions, like in the film “Braveheart.”

RTE: Did you ever have the feeling that you were on “holy ground,” as one does in Russia or Greece, or was it just an experience of ancient ruins?

ANTON: St. Cuthbert Island was “holy ground.” It is a very small island only twenty or twenty-five yards away from Lindisfarne, the Holy Island. This is where St. Cuthbert⁴ actually lived and laboured for Christ in the seventh

⁴ St. Cuthbert (+687) – Disciple of St. Aidan, who became a renowned bishop and abbot of Lindisfarne. In 698 his relics were found to be incorrupt and his shrine became a great pilgrimage center.

Opposite: Wall painting of St. Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral.

century. You can find ruins of the ancient chapel there and a modern cross, but it is possible to get to the island only at low tide. Durham Cathedral, with the graves of St. Bede and St. Cuthbert, was impressive and moving as well.

RTE: Sonia, earlier you mentioned your own interest in Lindisfarne and the Lindisfarne Gospels⁵. What did you find?

SONIA: Based on what I had already studied here in Moscow, I came to a better understanding of the patterns of the illustrations on the Gospels, their symbology, and what they are connected with. We later saw the original Lindisfarne Gospels, which had been brought from the British Museum in London for a special millenium exhibition at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It was very impressive. They are over 1300 years old, and were copied and illustrated soon after the introduction of Christianity in the area.

RTE: What are the Celtic manuscript illustrations connected with?

SONIA: With the Egyptian tradition, for one thing. Most of the spectacular ornamentation of the gospels and other manuscripts is from the seventh to the ninth centuries, and there are quite possibly both Mediterranean and Coptic Egyptian influences in methods and patterns. We are not sure if they were carried from Egypt directly – the patterns may also have arisen independently – but there was certainly trade and travel between Britain, Ireland, northern France, and the Mediterranean and northern Africa. There are all sorts of possibilities.

RTE: Did you notice similarities between Celtic Christianity and Orthodoxy as we know it today? When one reads about early Celtic Christianity it seems very close to the ascetics on Mount Athos from the last century.

SONIA: Yes, particularly in the lives of the saints. For example, St. Cuthbert went out to live as a hermit on a small island, as did our Russian saint, Alexander of Svir.

RTE: Did you venerate relics of early saints while you were in England?

⁵ Lindisfarne Gospels – The best preserved and most elaborately illuminated example of early medieval gospels. Produced in Lindisfarne Monastery in the late seventh or early eight century, it contains beautiful and complex illustrations to St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate gospels, now in the possession of the British Museum.

Opposite: Cross on St. Cuthbert's Island.





ANTON: We prayed at graves that contain relics, such as those of Venerable Bede and St. Cuthbert, also in Durham Cathedral.

RTE: Anglicans don't usually display relics as the Roman Catholics and Orthodox do, although England once had a tradition of shrines and relics as rich as Russia's.

Unfortunately, Henry VIII destroyed much of it in his Reformation – the reliquaries, the sepulchers, and most of the monasteries. One thing I noticed on my own visit to England was that the guides in these places spoke very euphemistically about “the dissolution of the monasteries,” as if they had all just dissolved into thin air... one day they were there, and the next day the monks decided to go away and left the buildings to fall down by themselves. Now we know that many of the monastics were brutally martyred, and that the destruction of the great monastic and pilgrimage centers parallels what happened in Russia in this century. It was a very sad loss for everyone.

There is another similarity with Russia: both countries are called “holy,” because they converted freely, without being forced.

ANTON: Sonia and I had this same thought at Marygate Library on Lindisfarne. It seemed to us that there are many similarities between the Christianization of Ireland and of Russia. It does seem that the initial conditions for receiving Christianity were similar in both countries, and there is a very fine thread of possibility that Christianity influenced northern Russia through Irish slaves who came from Scandinavia. Certainly, the descendants of Swedish Vikings played a major role in the conversion of Kievan Rus. In northwestern Russia we can find Celtic crosses – for example, in Pskov and on Valaam.

RTE: And your overall impressions?

SONIA: Our whole trip was one great story. It was like a dream. When you go somewhere and come back home, it is as if you've been in another world. The people there are so very friendly. Everyone we stayed with had their own fascinating life stories and interests. This was my first trip abroad, and I must say I was very surprised at what I saw. I had prepared for the trip by doing some reading on the Anglican Church to understand its background and what Anglicans believe today, but after arriving in England, I immedi-

Opposite: Durham Cathedral.

ately saw that the information in my books was not very up-to-date. I was amazed to discover such different ways people worship.

ANTON: In a very short period we saw many different forms of contemporary Christianity in Great Britain, as well as modern attempts to worship and live by some elements of Celtic Christianity – such as the Northumbria Community, Lindisfarne, Ray Simpson’s Community of St. Aidan and St. Hilda [of Whitby]. We also heard about a community on Iona, although we weren’t able to visit it. We spent a lot of time in traditional Anglican parishes as well, including five days in Sunderland and a week in Cramlington, where there are very modern parishes. Cramlington is a new and quick-growing city and the church has quite specific problems, so they organized what they call a church plant.

RTE: What is a church plant?

ANTON: The church meets, for example, in the primary school on Sundays for liturgy, and it is closer in feeling to Baptist and Evangelical congregations than to the average Anglican congregation. They’re doing this to try to reach out to people in the new neighborhoods.

SONIA: It was difficult for me to take part in the services. Their way of worship is not what I’m used to. People would invite us to have Communion, but we didn’t. Then they felt so bad that we were left out. They didn’t really understand, but after being there I can say that I gained a deeper appreciation for our own worship, tradition and values. I also have a great respect for those in the Anglican and Catholic churches. Now that I know them, I try to defend them. They are very sincere Christians.

ANTON: Yes, our not being able to take Communion in their church was a psychological problem for our friends. We sincerely didn’t want to hurt their feelings, but they honestly couldn’t understand us.

Like Sonia, when I see other Christian traditions, it gives me a far greater appreciation for what we have in Orthodoxy. Sometimes, you only gain this appreciation by seeing the alternatives. It’s like looking at a picture too closely, when you step away you see the whole. This was my third visit to the United Kingdom, so I wasn’t as surprised as Sonia was over what we saw.

Opposite: Venerable Bede.





People are actually the same everywhere, but their ways of thinking can be very different.

I'm not a deep philosopher, but I believe the East is more Platonic and the West is more Aristotelean. Action is often more important for people in the West than being. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I don't think you have to dissect something and take it all apart in order to understand it. For instance, we use electricity, but no one has ever been able to fully explain what electricity really is.

RTE: Since your return, have you found that other Russian Orthodox Christians are open to your pilgrimage or did they seem to think that you had done something a little too ecumenical?

SONIA: I had a conversation like this with my father who is an Orthodox priest. Although he is very open to people, he feels that Catholics and Anglicans have lost the older traditional Christianity. Although the people we met were very sincere in their lives and prayers, it sometimes did look too modern to us; some of them do things like sitting on the floor touching hands and legs.

ANTON: I think we must distinguish what we mean by ecumenism. For example, we were present at this very unusual prayer meeting Sonia spoke of, yet we met many traditional Christians in England as well. For instance, we spent an evening with a woman named Hazel and her friends. We shared a very familiar and close understanding of Christianity and found a kindred soul in her. She is a Roman Catholic and an icon painter, but sometimes it seemed to me that we were speaking with an Orthodox Christian, there was such a close understanding.

RTE: Anton, you mentioned Anglican communities that are trying to incorporate elements of Celtic Christianity into their life. How are they going about this?

ANTON: Members of the Northumbria Community told me that when they organized their common life they began by collecting Celtic prayers. Some of the prayers are modern and some are old. They sing a prayer ascribed to St. Patrick in a modern Celtic style, and it is very beautiful. They pray five times a day.

Opposite: Restored Iona Abbey, 2005.

RTE: Like the Orthodox cycle of services?

ANTON: Well, let's say, a bit more "democratic" in spirit... a bit looser as far as the times of day are concerned. You can go to Nethersprings, one of their places, and spend a week or a month there on retreat. It's about twenty miles from Lindisfarne.

At Nethersprings we were surprised to find a large number of Orthodox icons everywhere. They mentioned a friend from St. Petersburg who is their source for Orthodox books and icons. Their favorite book is *Poustinia* by Catherine de Hueck Doherty from Canada. She is Catholic, perhaps of Russian ancestry, and has somehow tried to bring the Russian idea of desert-dwelling to modern people. This community's poustinia, their desert, is like a big wooden box, with a door, stool, cross, candle, and a sign that says: "Poustinia in use." You hang the sign up on the door and can go in and pray and contemplate.

SONIA: This community has about three hundred members around the world. One woman there told us that this place was more for relaxation and retreat, but that they also have a very active side to their work, social work and such things. They also do Celtic dancing. I liked the community mostly because of the people; there was a very sincere atmosphere there.

We also found many individual Christians who accept and practice things outside of their Protestant tradition, such as using icons, and praying to the saints and the Mother of God for both the living and the dead. When Ray Simpson explained his community's spiritual practice he told us that one thing they try to do to receive God's grace is to pray to the Celtic saints. This is a very Orthodox idea.

ANTON: David Adams, a well-known British author on Celtic Christianity, told us that he has a St. Herman of Alaska Monastery English-language Orthodox calendar that contains the dates and names of Celtic Saints. These names aren't commonly listed in Anglican calendars, but you can find them in at least one Orthodox calendar.

RTE: Many years ago, in a Catholic university library in San Francisco, I saw a small 150-page volume listing Irish Saints who were canonized in the first thousand years of Christianity, about whom no one knows anything –

Opposite: Viking longboat in Oslo Viking Ship Museum.



only the names. Page after page of names. There were at least five thousand names there. There is also Bardsey Island off of Wales near St. David's; it was originally called the "Island of 20,000 Saints."

SONIA: There was a program on TV recently here in Moscow about Celtic Christianity and it said that more saints came through the Celts than any other branch of Christianity. It was fascinating.

I would like to say once again that I like Anglican Christians very much. They are wonderful people and I want to somehow help them as they rediscover their early Christian traditions.

RTE: Were there any awkward moments on your pilgrimage? How did you handle them?

ANTON: Well, the charismatic prayer meeting, of course, which was not part of our official program – we were invited to attend by a local pastor. I came from a Protestant background, so such things were not completely strange to me, but Sonia was very uncomfortable with it. People were shaking as they prayed. They said it was the Holy Spirit, but we understood that it is not necessary to try to explain everything away, that these people like to do this.

It was also uncomfortable, as I said before, when we couldn't fully participate in Anglican services. And, of course, the issue of women priests. We met some very sincere women who are ordained Anglican priests, and I got quite a number of surprised reactions at my church back in Yalta when I showed them my pictures. Women in our parish said: "What in the world is this?!" I lived with a family in Sunderland in which the husband and wife were both priests. A priest family. I tried to explain this to my Orthodox friends back home.

SONIA: They have a small child and she's pregnant again. I just can't imagine a pregnant priest. But I respect them and feel that they were both sincere. I told them that it was very foreign to us, but I could see that they were obviously trying to love God as best they could.

ANTON: Yes, the question is bound up with being versus function. We judge people today more by what they do than who they are. So, that leads to there being no difference between people any longer. Female or male – it all becomes the same. Often when you meet people today you hear, "Hi. What's your name? What do you do?" Their function seems to describe and identify

a person more than who they really are themselves. You can never just say, “Who are you?” That would be too uncomfortable and threatening. So, people define themselves by what they do.

People sometimes asked us very direct questions about subjects like women’s ordination and we would say, “Do you want us to answer diplomatically or honestly?” And they would say, “Be honest!” So we tried to be very diplomatic in our honesty. We realize that such practices are very natural to the Western culture where people are more liberal, but to us, many of them were quite foreign. For example, one day we were asked how we felt about things like the use of imagination and “creativity” in prayer and in structured spiritual exercises. We had to say that this was something quite foreign to our understanding of Orthodox Christianity and to the teachings of the early Church and the Holy Fathers. In our view, it is simply imagination – you cannot call these phenomenon spiritual, they are something psychological.

Of course, many Anglicans also understand this. We talked with people on Lindisfarne about how dangerous it is to confuse spirituality with one’s feelings, one’s own thoughts and ideas, and they agreed with us that it is perilous to mix up spirituality with emotions or feelings. Speaking of danger, I think it is quite dangerous for Western Christians to become interested in Celtic Christianity.

RTE: Why is that?

ANTON: Because if they search deeply for their roots, they may just end up Orthodox. ✦