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LIVING THEOLOGY IN THESSALONICA

Harbored in the northwest corner of the Aegean, for many people Thessalonica is the most engaging and livable city in Greece. Ancient enough to have been named after the sister of Alexander the Great; prominent enough to support universities, business, and the arts; venerable enough to have more Orthodox relics than the entire American continent, Thessalonica now welcomes foreign students to its theological faculty, housing them in the monastery that tradition says was built over the synagogue where St. Paul preached. Last summer, *Road to Emmaus* was able to talk with three of these students – Herman Middleton, Simo Haavisto, and Teemu Kurki – about their lives and studies in Thessalonica.

RTE: You are following in illustrious footsteps; Sts. Cyril and Methodius were also theology students in Thessalonica. How did the three of you come to study in Greece?

HERMAN: I was born in England, at Oxford, but was brought up in different countries around the world because of my father's work. My mother is English and my father, American. I spent more time in the States than in England, but more time overseas than in the States. I studied English literature and theology/biblical studies at Wheaton College near Chicago, from a standpoint of evangelical Anglicanism, although interiorly I was still searching. In my final year I had a class on the history of theology which introduced me to Orthodoxy and the Church Fathers – I already understood the problems of Protestantism in general, and I had read some of Dostoyevsky's novels, but I thought that Orthodoxy was just an eastern form of Roman Catholicism. I began to learn more about Orthodoxy from a friend who was looking into it, and finally I became Orthodox myself on Pascha of 1995. I wanted to continue my education and went to England, where I found that it was possible to study theology in Greece.

TEEMU: As for me, I was baptized as a child. My mother is Orthodox. Finland is not a very religious environment, but we had good religious training, weekly classes with a priest who came to the public school and youth work.

RTE: Is it true that in Finland you have two state religions — Orthodoxy and Lutheranism — and that is why the priest came to the public school for religious classes?

TEEMU: Yes. That was also why I was able to do parish work for my eighteen months compulsory civil service. Later, I found myself at loose ends, and when I came to Greece, I discovered that I could study theology here in



Herman Middleton

Thessalonica. I went to language school first — we all did — and then I got a place to live in Vlatadon Monastery, which has a dormitory for foreign theology students.

RTE: Simo, how about you?

SIMO: I became Orthodox at fifteen in Finland. Although my family as a whole is not very religious, my mother and I were both interested and as a child I was nominally Lutheran. My father's cousin is an Orthodox priest, and he helped quite a lot. He is now my spiritual father. When I was 18, I attended a Syndesmos* youth camp on Mt. Athos, and was inspired to study Greek and theology in Thessalonica. My spiritual father took me to the Archbishop of Finland, who helped us with the paperwork.

RTE: Do most of the students studying theology here have a goal in mind, like ordination or teaching, or are they just interested in theology for its own sake?

SIMO: Most of the foreign people who come here are Orthodox and they want to study theology for itself. There are many Greek students, however, who, because of the eccentricities of the Greek university admission system, accidentally get into theology school. They may not be interested at all.

HERMAN: In Greece, they give very difficult exams at the end of high school. No matter what department you apply for, if your exam grades aren't high

* Syndesmos: An international Orthodox Christian youth organization.

enough to get you into one of the more requested faculties like medical school or business, or science, they just put you anywhere. The last, lowest department that they put people into is the theological school. I would guess that as much as sixty percent of the freshman class doesn't want to be there.

RTE: Why do they stay?

HERMAN: They can transfer after the first year by redoing the exams and applying for another school. Some do that, but most just stay — perhaps they decide that they can't do any better, or they discover something in theology that they really like. Very few Greeks are atheists, but you do have a large number who are rather indifferent; that is, they'll go to church at Pascha and Christmas, they'll cross themselves when they pass a church or go in to light a candle when they need help. They are Orthodox, but they don't practice their faith daily.



Teemo Kurki

SIMO: There was a group of Greek girls in my Hebrew class who had never gone to Vespers. They didn't know anything about Vespers. But on the other hand, there are also many Greek students who are very traditional and involved in their faith; they know all the daily prayers and liturgy by heart, go to church every day, and visit monasteries.

RTE: But everyone goes to church on Pascha and Christmas?

HERMAN: Yes, 95%.

SIMO: The number of real atheists here in Greece has to be very small. Even in the Communist party there are faithful, practicing Christians.

RTE: What are your theological studies like? You've said that you all had to take a year of Greek because the courses are taught in Greek. Was that a great handicap for you?

HERMAN: Not really. The year of Greek prepared us enough, but it's still quite a big step between where you end up in the language school and the theological studies. The language school prepares people entering many different schools and can't teach a specific vocabulary, so the first few months

of theology are very difficult. You spend a lot of time with the dictionary and it's very slow-going. Some very gifted people come and don't do the year of language. They just take a summer course before.

TEEMU: If your Greek isn't very good, you can also go to one of the ecclesiastical schools, which aren't as academic as the university.

HERMAN: They are more like church high schools with some added years for young men who want to be priests, but without a theology degree. The students are often the sons of priests, or from families who want them to have a church-oriented education. Foreign students sometimes come for the last year of that program to get their Greek competency. Most of them are



Simo Haavisto

Greek-Americans or Greek-English. For them it is particularly difficult, because if you have even one Greek grandparent you have to take the very tough university entrance exams, whereas non-Greek foreigners don't.

RTE: Do many of the male students who study theology want to become priests?

SIMO: Actually, not many, and sixty percent of the class are women. These women certainly won't all become religious teachers and I often wonder what they will do with the degree — if I will meet them in a few years working in a supermarket.

HERMAN: The most frequent job for a theology graduate is as a religion teacher in a Greek public middle or high school, which have state-sponsored classes in Orthodox catechism. Also, the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree will help a priest get a higher status.

RTE: What do you mean by a higher status?

HERMAN: In broad strokes, after the 19th-century Greek revolution that freed Greece from the Turks, the first king, Otho, was Bavarian. He was very influenced by the West, and by Germany in particular. Under this Bavarian-German influence, the Church of Greece separated from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople and the government confiscated huge amounts of church property. They closed over 600 monasteries in one day.

RTE: Yes, I remember that they imposed a law that only monasteries with five or more monastics could stay open. There was resistance and even martyrdoms; monks died and some nuns were violated defending their monasteries.

HERMAN: Yes, they took land and buildings which had belonged to the Church since Byzantium, which even the Turks had respected as church property during their 500 year occupation. In return, the government paid the salaries of the priests and deacons, which, of course, gave them control of the clergy. All in all it was a bad deal. Today this means that if you are a cleric you are paid by the state, and if you have a better education or a big-city parish, you get paid more.

RTE: But less for those in the country or on the islands?

SIMO: Yes, in fact, there is a great lack of priests in the countryside. There are over two thousand parishes that don't have their own priest or deacon.

RTE: Can you tell me about the theological studies themselves? What classes do you take, and how do they compare to curriculum in the West?

HERMAN: Your degree would be a Bachelor of Theology, rather than a Bachelor of Arts, as Greece doesn't have the general education requirements that America does. It's the European system, actually, in which everyone has already done math, science, literature, etc., to a rather advanced standard in high school. At university you only take classes in your major, so when you come out after four years, you've done more theology than anyone in the States would have done in the same amount of time. It is more like an M. A. in Theology. The first year is pretty terrible, actually. It's very dry. The best classes are Introduction to the New and Old Testaments. Then we have a foundational course: Introduction to Theology. The later years are much more interesting.

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SIMO: Also in the first year there are liturgical classes and we get into the history of philosophy — a huge labor — not only the ancient philosophers, but Byzantine and even Western. It encompasses the philosophical thought of the entire western world from the beginning of recorded philosophy, and

lasts three years. I had to take the comprehensive exam five times.

HERMAN: There are separate departments responsible for the individual classes: Biblical Literature, Comparative Religion, Ecclesiastical History, Christian Literature, Archaeology and Christian Art, Worship, Christian Education, Canon Law, Dogmatics, and Ethics and Sociology.

RTE: Is there a pastoral care course for those intending to be ordained or to work as catechists, on how to approach difficult moral or ethical questions?

HERMAN: We have two mandatory pastoral theology classes, and a few others that touch upon it. There are other classes you can take as electives, particularly in the parallel Pastoral Department. The Pastoral Department has a wider range of classes, but they don't generally go as deep as in Theology. In Greece it is more common that a new priest will find an older, experienced priest to learn from. It's rare to learn all that in the classroom.

SIMO: Something that surprised me is that we have no formal music lessons in the Theology Department. The Pastoral Department has a few, but if we want to learn Byzantine chant, we just go to church and sing in the choir. Of course, there are many daily opportunities to do that here, before and after classes in the monastery and parish churches, and there are many highly-trained chanters, so we have quite a rich selection.

RTE: Are you satisfied with the theological education you are getting, or do you feel that you would have been better off at Oxford or somewhere else?

HERMAN: As far as the theological education goes, it is difficult to put it into those terms. I think that to really learn theology is to learn it on a very personal level, not just as an academic course. Intellectually, it would have been much more rigorous at Oxford. I would have learned ancient Greek better and would have been able to read the Fathers with more fluency, but the greatest benefit for me is just being in Greece. This has been a way to be in an Orthodox country, to be around Greek people, to spend time on the Holy Mountain. It's a way for me to shed the mistaken aspects of my Protestant upbringing, especially in one's relationship to other people and to money. The Greeks are generally more human in their relations and you see this in everyday society; the main impulse of people is to help you because many people are still very close to an evangelical way of life.

SIMO: A good example of this is small talk. If you don't readily answer, "I'm fine," to the question, "How are you?" Greeks are immediately concerned and genuinely interested in you. "What is the problem? How can I help you?"

HERMAN: I think you can get both academics and the Orthodox experience here if you want it. If the purpose of education is to be formed so that you can live a fuller life, a life more able to serve other people, then abstract theological concepts alone aren't going to be very helpful. At Oxford you wouldn't have the time to follow a course of study that interests you — you just follow the daily program. Here you have a lot of freedom. If you want to study a subject more in depth, you can. There is a library, and the professors are generally at a very high level in their scholarship and knowledge. Also, a great number of them are very faithful Orthodox people and you see that. It has an important influence on their teaching and their ability to give Orthodox theology, not just a course of study.

SIMO: However, the program is still constructed on the 19th-century German model, and many of the professors are saying, "We shouldn't have this westernized program. We are Orthodox here."

RTE: How would they change it?

SIMO: At least one of them, Professor Siasos in the Philosophy Department, has urged that Byzantine music be taught to everyone in the school, and that there be more practicum and reading of the Fathers.

RTE: How do you think it compares to St. Vladimir's and Holy Cross Seminary in the States?

HERMAN: I've heard that St. Vladimir's is more academically focused, along the lines of the secular American colleges with the pressure that goes along with that, while Holy Cross, naturally, is closer to the Greek practice. Holy Cross has knowledgeable professors, but also the freer Greek orientation.

TEEMU: I agree. Here, you are somehow free. You are not required to go to classes, so you learn to discipline yourself. How you study, how you learn depends very much on you. There is more room for individual interests and you have an opportunity to get to know the professors well.

RTE: You talk about freedom, but don't you also have academic pressure? Greek high school students are under tremendous pressure for their final

exams, with intensive tutoring after school and on Saturdays, and studies late into the night for years before graduation.

HERMAN: I have a sense that here they need that to come up to the more advanced European level, because the general high school teaching is not so thorough. In the universities it is different. For example, in the States there is a problem with students committing suicide at the universities because of the academic pressure. Here that would never happen. I'm sure that in the past century it has never happened once. My experience is that the professors here are very human. They aren't only interested in academics, although they are at a very high level as in Europe. Everyone here has to have a Ph.D to teach, while in the U.S. that is not a prerequisite.

RTE: These accessible professors must provide a wonderful opportunity to assimilate Orthodox attitudes that you wouldn't get through reading.

HERMAN: Yes, one of my roommates said his one regret was that he didn't spend more time in class. It's a unique opportunity, because you have something like forty Orthodox professors, most of them very intelligent and devout people.

RTE: Simo and Teemu, if we can change the subject a little, what do you see as the difference in Orthodox practice between Greek and Finnish Orthodoxy?

TEEMU: Greece has hundreds of monasteries, saints' relics, churches, while in Finland we have only two monasteries, one theological school, and about 50,000-60,000 Orthodox Christians. In Finland it is easy to teach people about the faith, about liturgical life; we know the services and the sacraments quite well. Here in Greece, while many people know these things better than the Finns, there are also many who don't know or who are indifferent. Often people here take Orthodoxy for granted, while in Finland you are a minority and have to know your faith.

SIMO: Yes, that is the strength of being a minority: you have to fight for your beliefs, to be able to answer if you are asked.

HERMAN: In Greece, the weight and richness of such a long history and tradition is almost too much, it becomes a burden and sometimes people just want to forget it. "It's just part of being Greek."



Relics of St. Demetrius

TEEMU: On the other hand; you also find people with very deep faith, more so than in Finland.

RTE: Why do you think that is? Many Finns are also cradle Orthodox.

TEEMU: In Finland there is a much greater influence from the Protestant world, and not as many possibilities for the Orthodox. We have a good basic level of education, but if you want to study on an advanced level or experience a deeper spiritual life, there aren't as many opportunities. In Greece you can get a greater depth of both academic and spiritual experience.

I'm not only speaking about the monasteries and making pilgrimages here, but they are a large part. In the 1940's and 50's the population of the Holy

In Greece, the weight and richness of such a long history and tradition is almost too much, it becomes a burden and sometimes people just want to forget it. "It's just part of being Greek."

Mountain declined, but now there are more men going there to become monks, and often abbots come from the Holy Mountain to give talks. There are many good spiritual fathers all over Greece.

Of course, there are also the relics. In the center of Thessalonica we have relics of the Apostle Paul, Great Martyr Demetrius, St. Anysia, St. Paul, St. David and Theodora of Thessalonica, St. Gregory Palamas, Sts. Cyprian and Justina... and a few hours away, St.

Gregory the Theologian, St. Arsenios of Cappadocia and the grave of Fr. Paisius of Mt. Athos. Mount Athos itself is rather close.

HERMAN: There is even a small relic of St. Herman of Alaska in the women's Monastery of the Annunciation in Ormylia.

Also, city parishes in Greece often have a *Pneumatiko Kentro* [Spiritual Center]. It depends on the priest, of course, but they sponsor church school, pilgrimages, iconography classes, youth groups, summer camps for children, and some churches have daily meals for anyone who needs them.

RTE: What things in Greek church life were hard to get used to?

TEEMU: Often you find a nice church, but then you have electric lights, electric bells, the priests speak through microphones, you sit down in pews and get comfortable. In Finland we are more used to the Russian tradition of

quieter services with the congregation standing.

SIMO: I don't know if it is because I am a foreigner, but I haven't been able to enter into normal parish life here in Greece, at least to the same degree that I did in Finland.

HERMAN: Yes, what is missing here is the sense of unity you get from being part of an Orthodox minority. There was a real solidarity in the parish I was in the United States, a sense of being community and family. Here you can get a bit lost, especially in Thessalonica and Athens.

RTE: Were there also cultural difference in Greece that surprised you?

HERMAN: I suppose that when most people come to Greece they see it as a very secular society, even more than the U.S., particularly in its advertising and vulgarity. Of course, the U.S. is a little puritanistic, and perhaps its cleanness derives more from ethics than from spiritual experience... but yes, the first thing that shocked me was the Greek honesty. They don't try to put up a good front or pretend to be something they are not. Sometimes you wish that they would. I was also surprised by the quickness of people to get angry, to speak angrily, or even just to seem angry when they really aren't — that's just the Mediterranean personality. Sometimes, of course, they do get angry, but I learned early that it doesn't last. By the next day they will have forgotten it. They just need to get it off their chest. It's good for human relations because people are honest with each other.

The generosity and general Christianity of people was also a surprise. When I arrived in 1998, a young couple came with me from Europe to study theology. They didn't have much to live on and every day when they opened the door, there would be things left on their doorstep: food, clothes, household goods. People wouldn't even ring, they'd just leave them and go. The neighbors knew about them and their need and they did what they could to help, even in such a big city as Thessalonica with foreigners everywhere. I've come to find that this is very characteristic of Greeks.

SIMO: I have several Greek friends who aren't religious at all, you might even say they are atheists, but deep in their hearts there is still some Orthodox faith or ethics, and they will often say something that I learned just the day before in a theology course. Deep thought or philosophy seem to come to many of them offhand, while in northern Europe we are more practical.

TEEMU: Sometimes for us foreigners, it seems that Greek behavior isn't very nice, but they also have big hearts. What you think you see, judging by your own standards, is not always the truth. On the other hand, in northern Europe you can see polite, kind behavior, but it often doesn't go very deep.

RTE: This is what Russian émigrés also say. They get to the West and everything is wonderful for a few weeks, and then they begin to feel very anxious.



The friendliness is not a front, but there is a border beyond which is one's private life, and there has to be a great deal of stretching to take someone in. In Russia, it's often the other way around; coolness at first, and then you are part of the family. They aren't used to the Western attitude of courtesy and helpfulness in small things, so they can be disappointed when they learn that it is not necessarily a sign that you are now close friends and ready to help each other through thick and thin.

HERMAN: Yes, it must be difficult when you expect people to be what they appear, and then they say, "Well, you can't ask me to do that. It's too much."

RTE: Do you feel that your own spiritual life has changed by being here? In

the West we talk about having an Orthodox world-view. Do you think there is such a thing, and have you begun to acquire it by living with the Greeks?

HERMAN: Yes. Definitely. As I said before, just seeing how they live is an education. Most of what I have gained spiritually has been outside the university, from just being with people. This is an odd example, but for many Greeks, even if they are not religious, their favorite food is lentils. Of course,



they eat meat and cheese, but many people prefer lentils over meat, and I believe that this is because they have fasted in this part of the world for two thousand years. Even in the university they have a fasting line for food.

SIMO: At first it surprised me that there would be non-fasting food on a fast day. But, of course, that is the freedom of Orthodoxy. You can fast or not. If Protestant countries fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays there would only be fast food, nothing else. It would be a law.

HERMAN: And again, their whole attitude towards money. I was told by many Greeks when I first arrived that all Greeks basically have a hole in their pocket. They don't hold onto money, they just can't. Of course, that's

a very Christian approach. You don't hold onto money, or hoard it.

SIMO: Nevertheless, Greeks are very clever in business and will sell anything they can — you can almost buy Granny, fresh or frozen — but even so, they are also very, very generous.

HERMAN: That generosity is hard to learn. I was told when I came that the best thing a Greek person can do when he goes out for a meal with a friend is to pay for the whole meal, while in the West it seems the best thing we can do is to have our friend pay for us.

SIMO: Yes, I agree with that. It is almost impossible for me to pay with my Greek friends; insisting is the quickest way to start a fight.

TEEMU: Being with Greek people has helped me to become strong in a way that I wouldn't have in Finland. Here, I've learned how to say no if I mean no, and yes if I mean yes.

SIMO: My life has changed as well. If I miss liturgy because of laziness, I feel guilty, whereas in Helsinki I didn't. I have a constant urge to go to Mt. Athos, to visit monasteries. Living your everyday life in a society that is to some degree Orthodox makes a difference.

RTE: How could someone who doesn't have the chance to live in an Orthodox country experience the things you've mentioned here?

SIMO: Although no one has to be Greek to be Orthodox, of course, I think that one thing we could learn from the Greeks and the Russians is flexibility, that life is in God's hands.

HERMAN: If you can't come to one of these countries, you can at least try to become aware of your roots: where you have come from, how you have been formed. If one begins to look critically at himself and the commandments of Christ, he will become aware that there is a serious division between our culture and our faith. Often, when reading the gospel, things strike me, perhaps because I see it being lived out here. We are very influenced by Protestantism, which, in my experience, weakens the approach to the Lord's commandments, to the Beatitudes, to the Sermon on the Mount. "He couldn't really have meant that..." or, "This just isn't possible for us...." Would He have said it if it wasn't possible?

The idea that to become perfect we have to sell what we have and give to the poor, or to say that when we lend someone something we shouldn't ask for it back... these were said as absolutes, but most of us can't accept that, even serious Protestant Christians. For Orthodox, as well, it is a hard saying — it goes against logic. So, if one is self-critical, there is much to be learned.

SIMO: There are some real differences in the Greek world-view that we underestimate. It's hard, for example, to study dogmatics with my rational western mind, because Christianity came from an eastern culture. At one time all of Europe was under this eastern Christian mind, but it vanished in the West, and to regain it now is very difficult. We underestimate the influence of Greek philosophical thought, and even nowadays it is possible for Greeks to argue for hours about small immaterial philosophical or theological points. A Finn would just say, "God is God, and that's that."

Also, in contemporary northern European Protestant countries, like Germany and Finland, where the church is a department of the state, religion has become relegated to church on Sunday while, this, over here, is my life. But in Greece, to consciously be a Christian is your life.

HERMAN: We were recently in Constantinople, and it is important to remember that Byzantium was one of the highest civilizations in the world, perhaps the highest. Just seeing the architecture, you realize that we don't have people now who can do what they did, and if you study Byzantine history you find that they were far beyond us in many ways. For instance, it is often said that there has never been a society that was so fair, in terms of the judicial system and public charities. That Greeks preserved their faith more or less intact through five hundred years of Moslem Turkish occupation and this last tragic century is a testimony to the depth of their Christianity. While that faith lives, it is their life. ✚

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