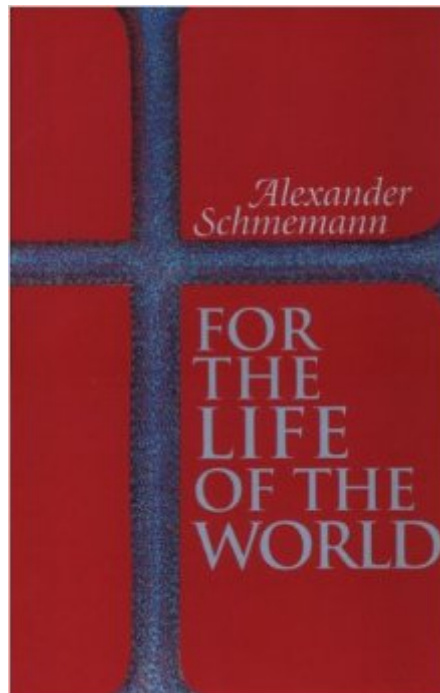


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For The Life Of The World: Sacraments And Orthodoxy



Synopsis

In *For the Life of the World* Alexander Schmemmann suggests an approach to the world and life within it, which stems from the liturgical experience of the Orthodox Church. He understands issues such as secularism and Christian culture from the perspective of the unbroken experience of the Church, as revealed and communicated in her worship, in her liturgy - the sacrament of the world, the sacrament of the Kingdom.

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Customer Reviews

"For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy," by Alexander Schmemmann, is a significant work for understanding the Orthodox--and therefore ancient Christian--view of sacraments and sacramental living. Two additional essays, written in the early 1970s: "Worship in a Secular Age," and "Sacrament and Symbol," are fitting appendices to the title work, which was originally published as a study guide for a 1963 National Christian Student Federation conference. Schmemmann states that we were created to live in a sacramental relationship with God and the creation, but this life was lost in the Fall of Adam and Eve. Christ, who gave his life "for the life of the world," came to restore this sacramental relationship, not only with God, but with all of Creation. Schmemmann writes that the purpose of the book "is to remind its readers that in Christ, life--life in all its totality--was returned to man, given again as sacrament and communion, made Eucharist." He goes on to discuss the importance of this understanding for our mission in the world. I know many individuals who have wondered how the Eastern Orthodox and Christians in the West (both Roman Catholic and

Protestant) can use the same terminology and mean different things. Sometimes the differences are subtle, sometimes radical. Schmemmann believes that secularism is at the heart of those differences, and that secularism was born when scholars in the West sought to analyze, define and explain the sacraments, most significantly the Eucharist (or Communion). By picking apart the meaning and "the elements" of Communion, scholasticism allowed the Eucharist to be divorced from the context of the Liturgy. Therefore, in order to satisfy an increasingly scientific approach, the West began to separate the sacred from the secular.

Occasionally one will stumble upon a book so filled with simple Christian wisdom as to take one's breath away. Such is the case with *For the Life of the World* by the late Orthodox writer Alexander Schmemmann. Originally written as a study guide on the Sacraments for a conference, the impact was so great it was decided to make the study more widely available in book form. The decision to publish has certainly been vindicated - the book has been influential not just with the Orthodox but throughout the Christian world and has profoundly affected (for the better) the Christian understanding of the Sacraments. From the first sentence we are taken into a view of the Sacraments immersed in the historic liturgy of the Church. For Schmemmann, the Western Church commits a fundamental error in attempting to analyze the Sacraments as "objects" in isolation from the liturgical context that gives them meaning. Instead, the Sacraments are the act of the Church within its liturgy to transform the world through Christ by offering the world and ourselves to the Father. Each of the recognized Sacraments of the Orthodox Church are considered within the liturgical life of the Church. This incarnational understanding of the Christian Faith presents the world itself - created by God and declared good - as something to be redeemed through Christ. Rejecting both the semi-gnostic anti-Sacramentalism of some Protestants as well as the view of medieval Roman Catholicism that bordered on "magic", Schmemmann returns to a patristic view of the Sacramental life.

I am Catholic. I began reading Orthodox theology about five years ago, after experiencing the Orthodox liturgy in the most dramatic and sublime manner possible: at Pascha vigil. It simply blew me away. In thirty years of weekly mass attendance I had never seen anything remotely approaching what I encountered that night. That unknown beauty both crushed and liberated me. It revolutionized my worldview. I began reading everything I could on ecclesiology, Church history, liturgy, and Orthodox apologetics. For Orthodox thinkers I dug into Lossky, Fr. Meyendorff, Elder Ephraim, Archbishop Kalistos Ware, the *Philokalia*, Pere Clement, St. Gregory Palamas, the Desert

Fathers, the Cappadocian Fathers, St. John Climacus, Solzenhitzen, so on & forth. It was all utterly amazing. I had had no idea. This book though, is a standout even amongst such rarified company. Schmemmann is simply stunning. From the first page he piles insight atop insight. I've given my copy of the book away, so I haven't got it in front of me. Still, from memory I can tell you that he takes and reveals to you blatantly obvious truths about the sacramental life that have been right in front of our noses all along. That all of creation is in fact Eucharistic, rent with power of the Resurrection. You will never approach the chalice with the same mind again, once you've read it. Orthodox theology and spirituality is most often like this: limpid & fierce, uncompromising. Very bracing, in a culture as decadent and corrupt in its thinking as ours. Shamefully, only the very best in contemporary Catholicism - both in terms of liturgy and theology - can touch or exceed the Orthodox average.

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