



What Is Orthodoxy?

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In speaking about Orthodoxy, we must not repeat the mistake of Pilate when he asked Christ, “What is truth?”¹ The correct question is: “Who is Truth?” For the truth is not an idea, a theory, or a system, but a Person, the All-Holy Person of the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. This is how we should ask about Orthodoxy, too, since it is identical with the Theanthropic Person of God the Word. He, as God-Man is Orthodoxy; He is the All-Truth.

1. If we wanted to define Christianity, *qua* Orthodoxy, in conventional terms, we would say that it is the experience of the presence of the Uncreated (God)² in

¹ St. John 18:38.

² Only the Triune God is uncreated. Creation, with man as its pinnacle, is created. God is not a “universal” force, in the language of the “New Age” (“We are all one, we are all God”), since, as Creator, He transcends the universe, being Something “wholly other” (*das ganz Andere*) in His Essence. There is no analogical relationship between the created and the Uncreated (see St. Greg-

history and the potential for the created (man) to become God “by Grace.” Given the continuous presence of God in Christ in historical reality, Christianity offers man the possibility of deification (θέωσις), just as medical science provides him with the possibility of maintaining or restoring his health, though in both cases through a definite therapeutic process and a specific way of life.

...The unique and absolute goal of the life in Christ is deification, namely, union with God, so that man, through participation in the Uncreated Energy of God, becomes “by Grace” that which God is by nature (unoriginate and unending). This is, in Christian terms, the meaning of salvation. It is not a matter of man’s moral improvement, but of the re-creation and re-formation in Christ of man and society, through a real and existential relationship with Christ, Who is the incarnate manifestation of God in history. Such is the implication of the expression of the Holy Apostle Paul: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.”³ He who is united with Christ is a new creation. For this reason, in Christian terms the Incarnation of God the Word, the redemptive entry of the Eternal and Supratemporal into historical time, is the beginning of a new world—literally, of a “New Age”—which will continue until the end of the ages, in the persons of authentic Christians, that is, the Saints. The Church, as the “Body of Christ” and communion in Christ, exists in the world in order to offer salvation, understood as the incorporation of man and society into this process of regeneration.⁴ This salvific work of the Church is accomplished through a specific therapeutic method, whereby the Church, in essence, operates in history as a universal infirmary. St. John Chrysostomos (†407) calls the Church a “spiritual hospital.”⁵

In the ensuing pages we will answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the sickness that Orthodox Christianity cures?
- (2) What is the therapeutic method that it employs?

ory Palamas, *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters on Topics of Natural and Theological Science*, §78, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CL, col. 1176B-D; John S. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin*, trans. George S. Gabriel [Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr Publishing, 2002], pp. 35-39). For this reason, the Uncreated is known through His self-disclosure.

³ II Corinthians 5:17.

⁴ An important Christian text of the second century, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, says that, in order for us to become members of the Body of Christ, we must be “rectangular stones” (suitable for building), not “round” ones (Bk. III, Similitude IX.6.8).

⁵ See, for example, “Homily ‘On Not Publishing the Sins of One’s Brethren,’” §1, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LI, cols. 353–354; “Homily I on Genesis,” §1, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LIII, col. 22.

(3) What is the hallmark of authentic Christianity that radically differentiates it from heretical deviations therefrom, and also from every form of religion?⁶

2. The sickness of human nature is the fallen condition of mankind and at the same time of all of creation, which suffers together with him.⁷ This diagnosis pertains to every human being, regardless of whether he is Christian or not, by reason of the natural unity of humanity at large.⁸ Orthodox Christianity is not confined within the narrow bounds of a religion that is interested only in its own followers. Rather, like God, it “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth,”⁹ since God is the “Savior of all men.”¹⁰ The sickness about which Christianity speaks, therefore, is universal.¹¹ Just as the Fall (that is, the sickness) is universal, so too salvific therapy depends directly upon the interior functioning of each person.

The natural (authentic) state of a person is defined in Patristic terms, by the functioning inside him of three memory systems, two of which are familiar and monitored by medical science, while the third is a matter for pastoral therapeutics. The first system is cellular memory (DNA), which determines everything inside a human organism. The second is the cerebral cellular memory, the functioning of the brain, which regulates our relationship with our self and with our

⁶ According to Father John Romanides, to whom primarily we owe the return to a “Philokalic” (therapeutic-ascetic) view of our Faith, especially at an academic level, “religion” is every “equation” of the Uncreated and the created, such as occurs in idolatry. The “religious” man projects his “preconceptions” (thoughts and ideas) onto the realm of the Divine, “manufacturing” his own God (this can happen also in non-Patristic Orthodoxy). His goal is the “propitiation” or “appeasement” of the Divine and, ultimately, the “utilization” of God for his own advantage (a magical relationship: “do, ut des” [I give, in order that you might give]). In our Tradition, however, God has no need of “appeasement,” since “He first loved us” (I St. John 4:19). Our God acts as “Love” (I St. John 4:16)—and altruistic love, at that. He gives all and seeks nothing from His creatures. For this reason, altruism is the essence of Christian love, which transcends any notion of transaction. See Romanides, “Orthodoxy and Religion,” <http://hsir.org/p/397>

⁷ “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Romans 8:22).

⁸ “[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

⁹ I St. Timothy 2:4.

¹⁰ I St. Timothy 4:10.

¹¹ “...death passed upon all men, for that [by reason of this death] all have sinned [missed the mark in their journey toward deification]” (Romans 5:12).

environment. Both of these systems are familiar to medical science, whose concern it is to maintain their harmonious operation.

The experience of the Saints knows another memory system, the memory of the heart, or noetic memory, which operates inside the heart and with which medical science is unfamiliar. The heart, according to Orthodox Tradition, does not function merely physically, as a pump to circulate the blood, for beyond its natural function it has one that is supranatural. Under certain preconditions it becomes the locus of communion with God, namely with His Uncreated Energy. This, of course, can [only] be understood through the experience of the Saints, the true Christians, and not through the rational faculty or intellectual theologizing.

Saint Nicodemos the Hagiorite (†1809), recapitulating the entire Patristic Tradition in his work *Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*, calls the heart a natural center, a supranatural center, and also a para-natural center, whenever the heart's supranatural functioning is inactive on account of its domination by the passions.¹² The supranatural functioning of the heart is the absolute precondition for the perfection and fulfillment of man, namely, his deification, his full incorporation into communion in Christ.

In its supranatural functioning, the heart becomes the place in which the mind (νοῦς) is activated. In the nomenclature of Orthodoxy, the mind (in the New Testament it is called the “spirit” of man and the “eye of the soul”) is the activity of the soul by which man knows God, attaining to the vision of God (Θεοπρία). Of course we must point out, by way of clarification, that knowledge of God does not mean knowledge of the unapproachable and inaccessible Divine Essence, but of the Divine Energy. The distinction between the Essence and the Energy of God is the fundamental difference between Orthodoxy and every other version of Christianity. The energy of the mind within the heart is called the “noetic functioning” of the heart. For the sake of further clarification, mind (νοῦς) and reason (λόγος) are not identical in Orthodoxy, because reason operates in the brain, whereas the mind operates in the heart.

Noetic functioning is actualized as the unceasing prayer¹³ of the Holy Spirit in the heart,¹⁴ which the Holy Fathers call “remembrance of God.” Having with-

¹² *A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. Peter A. Chamberas (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 154-157.

¹³ Cf. I Thessalonians 5:17.

¹⁴ Cf. Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:26; I Thessalonians 5:19.

in his heart the “remembrance of God,” man has the sense of God’s “indwelling” within him.¹⁵ St. Basil the Great says in his second epistle that the remembrance of God remains unceasing when it is not interrupted by earthly cares, when the mind “retreats” to God, that is, has communion with God.¹⁶ This, however, does not mean that the believer who is acted upon by Divine Energy avoids the necessary cares of life, remaining inert or in some kind of ecstasy. It means, rather, the liberation of the mind from these cares, with which reason is preoccupied. To use an example relevant to us: a scientist who has acquired noetic functioning deals with his problems by means of reason, while his mind within his heart preserves the memory of God unceasingly. The person who maintains the three aforementioned memory systems is the Saint. In Orthodox terms, he is a healthy (normal) human being. This is why the therapy of Orthodoxy is linked to man’s journey towards holiness.

The dysfunctionality or subfunctionality of man’s noetic energy is the essence of his fall. The notorious “ancestral sin” is precisely man’s failure, at the very outset of his presence in history, to preserve the remembrance of God, that is, communion with God, in his heart.

All of the descendants of the first-fashioned human beings share in this morbid condition, since it is not some moral—that is, personal—sin, but a sickness of man’s nature,¹⁷ transmitted from person to person, exactly like a sickness that a tree transmits to all other trees originating from it.

Inactivity of the noetic functioning or of the remembrance of God, and its confusion with the functioning of the brain—as happens to all of us—enslaves man to angst and to the environment, and also to the quest for happiness through individualism and an antisocial outlook. In the sickness of his fallen state, man manipulates God and his fellowman in order to reinforce his individual security and happiness. God is manipulated through “religion” (the attempt to elicit power from the Divine), which can degenerate into the self-deification of man.¹⁸ One manipulates his fellowmen and, by extension, creation by exploiting them in every possible way. This, therefore, is the sickness that man

¹⁵ Romans 8:11.

¹⁶ “Epistle II,” §4, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXII, col. 229B.

¹⁷ “Our nature became diseased with sin,” observes St. Cyril of Alexandria (†444) (*Commentary on Romans, Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXIV, col. 789A).

¹⁸ “I have become mine own idol,” says St. Andrew of Crete in his Great Canon (*The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware [London: Faber and Faber, 1978], p. 393).

seeks to cure by becoming fully incorporated into the “spiritual hospital” of the Church.¹⁹

3. The purpose of the Church’s presence in the world, as a communion in Christ, is to cure man through the restoration of the communion of his heart with God—in other words, of his noetic functioning. According to late Father John Romanides, “the Patristic Tradition is neither a social philosophy nor an ethical system, nor is it religious dogmatism; it is a therapeutic regimen. In this respect, it is very similar to medicine, and especially psychiatry. The noetic energy of the soul, which prays mentally and unceasingly inside the heart, is a physiological organ that everyone possesses and is in need of therapy. Neither philosophy nor any of the known positive or social sciences can cure this organ.... This is why one who is unhealed is not even aware of the existence of this organ.”²⁰

Man’s need to be cured, according to the foregoing, is an issue that concerns all human beings, pertaining primarily to the restoration of every person to his natural state of existence through the reactivation of the third mnemonic faculty (that of the nous). However, it also extends to man’s social existence. In order for man to be in communion with his fellowman as a brother, his self-interest, which ultimately functions as self-love, must be transformed into selflessness.²¹ The love of the Triune God,²² which gives everything without seeking anything in exchange, is selfless. That is why the social ideal of Orthodox Christianity is not “common ownership,” but “non-acquisitiveness,” as a voluntary renunciation of any entitlement. Only then is justice possible.

The therapeutic method provided by the Church is the spiritual life, life in the Holy Spirit. Spiritual life is experienced as ascesis and as participation in the Uncreated Grace bestowed by means of the Mysteries. Ascesis is the forcing of our autonomous nature deadened through sin, which is on the way to spiritual or eternal death, i.e., eternal separation from the Grace of God. The aim of ascesis is victory over the passions, for the purpose of overcoming internal en-

¹⁹ This is expressed by the familiar and oft-repeated liturgical formula: “Let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole life unto Christ, our God.” Full incorporation occurs as a rule in monasteries, when they function in an Orthodox manner, of course. That is why monasteries continue to be the models for parishes in the “world.”

²⁰ *Ρωμαῖοι ἢ Ρωμηοὶ Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonike: Ekdoseis P. Pournara, 1984), pp. 22-23.

²¹ “Love...seeketh not its own” (I Corinthians 13:5).

²² Romans 5:8; I St. John 4:7-11.

slavement to the breeding-grounds of [spiritual] sickness and participating in Christ's Cross and Resurrection. The Christian who practices self-restraint under the guidance of his spiritual Father (therapist) becomes receptive to Grace, which he receives through his participation in the Mysteriological (Sacramental) life of the Body of the Church. There is no such thing as a non-practicing Christian, just as there is no such thing as a person under treatment who does not follow the therapeutic regimen prescribed by his doctor.

4. The foregoing considerations lead to certain constants, which confirm the nature of Orthodox Christianity:

(1) The Church, as the Body of Christ, functions as a clinic or hospital. Otherwise, it would not be a Church, but a religion. The clergy were originally chosen by those who were cured, in order to serve as therapists of others. The therapeutic work of the Church is upheld today chiefly in monasteries, which, since they still offer resistance to secularism, are continuators of the Church of Apostolic times.

(2) The Church's expert therapists are those who are already cured. One who has not had the experience of therapy cannot be a therapist. This is the essential difference between pastoral therapeutic science and medical science. Skilled ecclesiastical therapists (both Fathers and Mothers) produce other therapists, just as professors of medicine produce their successors.

(3) For the Church to confine itself simply to forgiving sins for the purpose of affording entry into Paradise after death is a distortion, and is tantamount to medical science forgiving a patient, in order that he might be healed after death! The Church does not aim *to send* someone to Paradise or Hell. Besides, Paradise and Hell are not places, but modes of existence.²³ By healing mankind, the Church prepares a person to behold Christ eternally in His Uncreated Light as Paradise, and not as Hell, that is, as "a consuming fire."²⁴ And this of course concerns every single human being, since ALL people will look eternally upon Christ as "Judge" of the world.

(4) The validity of a science is verified by the realization of its goals (for example, in medicine, by the cure of the patient). This is how genuine scientific medicine is distinguished from quackery. The criterion of the Church's pastoral

²³ For a more detailed exposition of this topic, see Father Metallinos' excellent article, "Paradise and Hell in the Orthodox Tradition," <http://hsir.org/p/ty3>

²⁴ Hebrews 12:29.

therapy is the accomplishment of spiritual healing through opening the path to deification. Therapy is not postponed to the afterlife; it takes place during man's lifetime, here in this world (in the here and now). This can be ascertained from the incorrupt Relics of the Saints, which have overcome biological decay, such as those of the Saints of the Ionian Islands: Spyridon, Gerasimos, Dionysios, and Theodora the Empress.²⁵ Incorrupt relics are, in our Tradition, indisputable evidence of deification, that is, of the fulfillment of the Church's ascetical therapy.

I would like to ask the medical establishment of our country to pay special attention to the case of incorrupt Holy Relics, given not only that they have not been tampered with by scientists, but also that the Energy of Divine Grace manifests itself in them. For precisely at the moment when the disintegration of the cellular system begins, such disintegration automatically ceases, and instead of any stench, the body emanates a distinctive fragrance. I confine myself to medical symptoms, and will not venture into miracles as evidence of deification, since that belongs to another domain.

(5) Finally, the sacred texts of the Church (Holy Scripture and the Synodal and Patristic texts) are not codifications of any Christian ideology but are therapeutic in nature and function just as textbooks do in medical science. The same applies to liturgical texts, such as prayers. The simple reading of a prayer, without a parallel involvement of the believer in the therapeutic procedure of the Church would be no different from a case in which a patient with severe pains resorts to a doctor and the latter, instead of actively intervening, merely places the patient on an operating table and reads him the chapter that pertains to his ailment!

This, in a nutshell, is Orthodoxy. It is of no importance whether one accepts it or not. For this reason, I am addressing everyone, including non-Christians and the indifferent, and also [nominal] "Christians." Any other version of Christianity constitutes a falsification and distortion thereof, even if it seeks to present itself as Orthodoxy.



²⁵ St. Spyridon, Bishop of Trimythous, Cyprus († ca. 348), whose Relics are preserved in Kerkyra (Corfu); St. Gerasimos of Kephallenia († 1579); St. Dionysios of Zakynthos, Bishop of Ægina († 1622), whose Relics are in Zakynthos; and St. Theodora the Empress (†867), the pious wife of the Iconoclast Emperor Theophilos, who presided over the restoration of the Holy Icons and the conclusive defeat of Iconoclasm in 843, and whose Relics are in Kerkyra.

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_____. “Ἡ θρησκεία εἶναι νευροβιολογικὴ ἀσθένεια, ἡ δὲ Ὀρθοδοξία ἡ θεραπεία τῆς” (Religion is a neurobiological sickness, but Orthodoxy is its cure), in *Ὀρθοδοξία-Ἑλληνισμός: πορεία στὴν γ’ χιλιετία* [Orthodoxy and Hellenism: journey towards the third millennium] (Holy Mountain: Ekdosis Hieras Mones Koutloumousiou, 1996), Vol. II, pp. 67-87.

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* Source: Protopresbyter George D. Metallinos, *Ὅψεις τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης Ταυτότητος* (Aspects of Orthodox identity) (Thessalonike: Ekdoseis “Orthodoxos Kypsele,” 2009), pp. 5-16. Two paragraphs and several words that are missing from this printed version have been supplied from the version posted on the website “Ὀρθόδοξη Ὁμάδα Δογματικῆς Ἐρευνας” [Orthodox Outlet for Dogmatic Enquiries], <http://www.oodegr.com/oode/psyxotherap/therapeiai.htm>