

This is a chapter from *The Non-Orthodox: The Orthodox Teaching on Christians Outside of the Church*. This book was originally published in 1999 by Regina Orthodox Press in Salisbury, MA (Frank Schaeffer's publishing house). For the complete book, as well as reviews and related articles, go to <http://orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/status.aspx>. (© Patrick Barnes, 1999, 2004)

Appendix II: The Use of the Term “Heretic”

It is worth saying a few words on the use of a term that unfortunately has acquired quite a pejorative reputation.

Father Seraphim of Platina once wrote the following in a letter to a woman who was interested in becoming Orthodox but who was concerned about how some in the Orthodox Church (usually converts) related to those outside of Her, resorting even to offensive name-calling:

I was happy to receive your letter—happy not because you are confused about the question that troubles you, but because your attitude reveals that in the truth of Orthodoxy to which you are drawn you wish to find room also for a loving, compassionate attitude to those outside the Orthodox Faith.

I firmly believe that this is indeed what Orthodoxy teaches. . . .

The word “heretic”. . . is indeed used too frequently nowadays. It has a definite meaning and function, to distinguish new teachings from the Orthodox teaching; but few of the non-Orthodox Christians today are consciously “heretics,” and it really does no good to call them that.

In the end, I think, Father Dimitry Dudko’s attitude is the correct one: We should view the non-Orthodox as people to whom Orthodoxy has not yet been revealed, as people who are *potentially Orthodox* (if only we ourselves would give them a better example!). There is no reason why we cannot call them Christians and be on good terms with them, recognize that we have at least our faith in Christ in common, and live in peace especially with our own families. St. Innocent’s attitude to the Roman Catholics in California is a good example for us. A harsh, polemical attitude is called for only when the non-Orthodox are trying to take away our flocks or change our teachings.¹⁷⁰

We live in a culture of extreme atheistic relativism, where the only dogma tolerated is that we should be intolerant of those who actually believe that there are dogmas reflecting absolute truth. Combine this with popular attitudes reflecting sensitivity to “multi-cultural diversity” and “politically correct language,” and the terms “heretic” and “heresy” end up seeming harsh and “unloving.” Yet these traditional terms, found often in the writings of the Fathers, should not be viewed by informed and sober-minded people in such an emotionally negative way.

¹⁷⁰ Christensen, pp. 757-758.

This language may “turn off” some people, but it is only because they do not know what is meant by the terms “heretic” and “heresy” and the necessity for them. . . . [T]hese words have been in the theological glossary of the Orthodox Church from the beginning.

A “heretic” is simply one who maintains a “heretical doctrine.” The sincerity and good will of the “heretic” is not in question. Nevertheless, “heresy” is evil, because it is a powerful means by which the Devil seeks to “prevail” against the Church. . . .¹⁷¹

Western Christians should keep in mind that the position of the Church against heretics and heretical teaching—most forcefully stated in Her various anathemas—has arisen, and will continue to arise as long as She contends in this world, for *pastoral* reasons (e.g., to guard the flock and to awaken those in error), *not* to condemn others harshly. As Archbishop Chrysostomos states:

[W]e must realize that the Orthodox Church is “catholic.” It is meant for everyone. When, therefore, we seek to protect those within the Church from the *bacterium* of non-Orthodox belief, we must be constantly aware that this is for the purpose also of preserving Orthodoxy as a pure standard for all those who confess Christ (if not for all of those who are not, in fact, confessors of the Christian Faith). We wish to preserve perfectly and in full force the bread of salvation taught to us by the Prophets, the Savior, the Apostles, and the Fathers and Mothers of the Church, lest we offer stones in the name of Orthodoxy. Our exclusivity, our *apparent* disdain for the religious observances of others, and our fear of the relativism of even the best-intentioned ecumenists are things that ultimately derive from pure and true ecumenism, which is expressed in the missionary spirit of desiring with the whole heart and soul to bring all mankind to Orthodoxy. We must remember this. And if we do remember it, then we will be very careful not to hurt, to insult, or to humiliate non-Orthodox. All spiritual actions are, of course, meant to benefit our own souls; but, at the same time, they are aimed at the salvation of our fellow man.¹⁷²

It goes without saying that one should be extremely careful when using the terms “heresy” and “heretic.” They are unfortunately loaded with many negative connotations, perhaps making them an unwise choice of words depending upon the recipient. When not in the hands of a person who is “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Saint Matt. 10:16), such words could be misconstrued as a statement about a person’s sincerity or love for God—which may be very genuine—or about their eternal

¹⁷¹ “What Is Heresy?,” St. Nectarios Education Series No. 63.

¹⁷² *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. IV, No. 3, p. 20. Though this is more applicable to the determination of heresy in a member of the Church, it is worth repeating here:

[W]hen the Church issues statements against a heresy, it is readily cognizant of its responsibility to exercise ‘economy’ in the case of those who unknowingly fall to misbelief, and it never issues its condemnations with the intention of destroying souls, but of awakening those in the dark sleep of error and bringing them to repentance. (“The True Nature of Heresy,” pp. 76-77)

destiny. Though a use of these terms is clearly warranted by Holy Tradition and by the example of the God-bearing Fathers, the potential for abuse is great, especially for those who are not skilled at “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).