

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 IV: A Personal Letter to a Protestant Inquirer

As this book was going to press I exchanged a series of letters with a Reformed Protestant who had seen some of my "postings" to an Internet forum. Many of his questions concerned ecclesiological issues. In an attempt to help him resolve some of these issues I sent him a copy of Chapters Six and Seven. In response he wrote the following:

In the first section of Chapter Seven you said, "...to state that there is 'no salvation outside of the Church' is not the same thing as stating 'no one outside of the Church can be saved.'" This may be a fundamental sticking point for me in my understanding because I cannot see anything but a problem with this. It looks like a flat out logical contradiction. To me it looks like someone saying, "Just because he only has a half dozen eggs doesn't mean he only has six eggs." As far as I can understand it, there can be "no" salvation outside the Church, or there can be "some" salvation outside the Church, but to assert that both are true makes no sense. To me it would be like being told I have to believe in square circles in order to be a Christian. How can I make myself believe in a contradiction? I understand that there are mysteries of the faith beyond my feeble comprehension, but if true contradiction is part of the faith, then none of our discussion really matters all that much because then the Orthodox Church could be both the one true Church and also be a false church at the same time. How could I trust the promise of God if its opposite could simultaneously be true? I guess my question here is why you wrote that this statement was still within the bounds of what the Orthodox would have no problem with? To me it involves either pure contra-diction or extreme equivocation. Either way, I don't understand how it could be useful in explaining truth.

We thought it beneficial to publish my response to his letter, more excerpts from which are contained therein.

Dear X,

Thank you for your note and questions. Of course, the overall premise of my book is that it is not a contradiction to hold the Patristic axiom "*extra ecclesiam nulla sallus*" while at the same time holding forth the possibility of persons inheriting eternal life without having been in the Orthodox Church. The second principle is drawn from dogmas concerning God: that He is a righteous Judge who is plenteous in mercy and rich in

love, Whose will it is that all men might be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). I demonstrate that the juxtaposition of these principles results in an Orthodox answer to the “burning question”: the maintenance of an apparent antinomy. This answer is one that enjoys wide support from Saints and teachers of the Church. In other words, in my book I do two main things. First, I try to clarify and reinforce the reader’s understanding of Orthodox ecclesiology during a time when it is under siege. Second, I critique various derived statements concerning the difficulties raised by its implications, ultimately positing a “new apothegm.”

I think your problem with these concepts may stem from something we all suffer from in the West: rationalism—*i.e.*, a penchant for wanting truth to be expressed in a systematic way that ties up all the loose ends and connects all the dots. In a word, “over-logicalness.” It seems that you are attempting to logically bring about a full reconciliation of two seemingly contradictory axioms. However, this is not a Christian way of thinking about theological matters. This is because much of Christian theology is an apparent antinomy.

In our very theology, we Orthodox apply the principle of moderation, of practical objectivity, if you will. The apophatic character of our approach to the truths about and of God is based on the juxtaposition of opposites. By bringing two opposing principles into unity, we often approach the apparent enigma of Christian truth. But this, too, is not a process of compromise, but a process in which the real force of truth is made manifest.”¹⁷⁶

A few examples will suffice: the Chalcedonian *Oros* concerning the Person of Christ (that He is both fully God and fully Man without any “confusion, change, division, or separation” of the two Natures), the dogma of the Holy Trinity (God as One in Three Persons), and the Orthodox doctrine of synergy (summed up so beautifully in Phil. 2:12b-13 and carefully worked out within the limits of human reason and divine revelation in the thirteenth of Saint John Cassian’s *Conferences*).

As Christian history shows us, heresy typically arises from an overemphasis of one aspect of the truth, leading to a neglect of another aspect without which balance is not maintained.

It was characteristic of heretics that they erred in one extreme or the other, denying either the One or the Three, either despising marriage or denigrating virginity. “But the church, by contrast, proceeds with ordered composure midway between the quarrels on both sides.”¹⁷⁷

In short, my book is an attempt to “proceed midway.”

¹⁷⁶ *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 6.

¹⁷⁷ Pelikan, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

I should point out that what I try to elucidate and defend is certainly not dogma. In other words, Orthodox ecclesiology *is* dogma; the thesis of my book is not. It is quite possible that one could write a book arguing that the second axiom concerning God's love and mercy should not lead one to conclude that anyone can be saved who was not a member of the Church in this life. However, this would not make my book "wrong" and theirs "right." Rather, it would only show that the question of the eternal status of heterodox believers is not one for which the Church has ever formulated a dogmatic answer. There are many questions like this in Holy Orthodoxy.

You wrote: "So for now the only two positions that I see as being consistent with this basic truth are 1) 'Outside of the Church there is no salvation; and my communion *is* the Church; therefore a person cannot receive salvation if he was never a member of my communion'; or 2) 'Outside of the Church there is no salvation; but it is possible for salvation to be found outside of my communion; therefore the Church might include more communions than my own.'" In response I say that the first *could* be demonstrated from Holy Tradition; however, the Mind of the Church, as noetically discerned by the Holy Fathers, does not seem to have borne witness to this as an accurate statement (let alone *dogma*) of the Church's attitude towards the heterodox. Point One is not necessarily "incorrect," it is just not balanced enough by other truths. And it certainly does not have to be affirmed to be an Orthodox Christian. On the other hand, Point Two is entirely wrong. It reflects an attempt to reconcile two seemingly contradictory principles in a way that leads to a heretical conclusion. This is akin to the manner in which Nestorius tried to resolve the apparent antinomy of the two Natures of Christ in one Person.

You then wrote: "The bulk of the last letter I sent was explaining why I see this position as problematic. I see it as making it extremely difficult to know where to draw the boundary once it allows for anyone to be 'saved' outside the Church." As I think I have demonstrated, there is no difficulty here at all. One simply affirms the boundaries as they are clearly and dogmatically expressed in Holy Tradition and then juxtaposes the great mercy and love of God, all in order to demonstrate that a good case can be made for a person being granted eternal life in the Kingdom of God who—through no fault of his own or for reasons that only God can judge—did not die as an Orthodox Christian. I do not attempt to posit my own theory as to how—within the limits of Holy Tradition—these two principles might be fully reconciled. (This is really all that Khomiakov was trying to do with his "invisible ties.") My understanding of the Patristic consensus is that all one needs to do is maintain the apparent antinomy and leave it at that. What many ecumenists do, however, is undermine the first principle in their appeal to the second. This is un-Orthodox and completely unnecessary.

As for Father X's statement on the forum concerning the probability that even members of the Jehovah's Witnesses—"Christians" who openly and consciously attack

the Holy Trinity—can be saved: this is just his opinion. I do not necessarily share it. I simply refrain from making any statements about how God will judge their members. Fortunately, I am not required to sort this out in order to be an Orthodox Christian!

This leads me to emphasize something I have stated in another chapter. I want you to give it serious consideration. I am referring to Saint Theophan the Recluse's reply to an "inquirer" concerning the question of whether the heterodox can be saved. He replied: "Why do you worry about them?... You and I should not be burdened with such a concern. Study yourself and your own sins..." Your desire to find and embrace the purity of the Truth is admirable. But you must keep in mind that there are certain things that God has chosen not to reveal to us. One of these is how He will ultimately judge others on that Day. He has revealed certain aspects of that Day of Judgment in order that we may repent and prepare ourselves; but He has not told us how He will—in His infinite knowledge of our incredibly complex nature and His providential ordering of our lives—ultimately weigh each of us in the balance. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). This being true, we should not concern ourselves with whether God will save others or how. For us it is enough to know where and how *we* can be saved. We affirm this to be only within the Orthodox Church; but we can also make a compelling case from Holy Tradition that we do not also have to affirm that He will not save a portion of those who do not enter the Church in this life.

I hope this helps. May the grace of God lead you into all truth!

Sincerely yours, Patrick