

ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

A Living Tradition

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[Translated from the Bulgarian]

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IT IS FASHIONABLE today to speak about *spirituality*: a vague notion, torn away from its inherent New Testamental context and comprised of an amorphous conglomeration of anything associated with so-called “spiritual culture” or “spiritual values.” Included in this conglomeration is “religious spirituality”—a notion no less vague than these others, and a mere variant of them. In fact, it is not unintentionally that contemporary religious liberals hold precisely to the concept of “spirituality” as the common denominator, of sorts, of all religions, a concept which provides limitless opportunities for every kind of obscure theological pursuit. The term *tradition*, by the same token, has been encrusted with so many layers of connotations, that it is in danger of losing almost completely its original Patristic meaning—not only because of its profanation and colloquial implications, but also because it has lost its clarity in the theological lexicon. One need only call to mind its use in the sense of conveying what is *conventional*.

To speak of Orthodox spirituality as a living tradition, one must apophatically transcend these contemporary constructs, their layers

of meaning, and the values that they reflect, things which, when imposed on Orthodox spirituality, obfuscate its profundity and genuine form, making it impossible to understand Orthodoxy precisely as a *living* tradition and rendering it one of the “conventions” of “Christian spirituality,” or some repository of dead cultural phenomena. There are also other impediments to understanding Orthodoxy in a genuine way. There is, for example, the contemporary dilettantish interest in religion and its “spirituality.” The modern “religious” dilettante is enraptured by the *stylish* or *prestigious* accidents that surround religion, therefore reducing the arduous nature of the spiritual quest to a kind of intellectual coquetry.

Painting with bold strokes, how is Orthodoxy and its spirituality viewed, in the light of prevailing intellectual trends and value systems, in the various areas of intellectual inquiry, including theology, and in the light of Western Christianity? Let me present several distinct responses:

- In broad terms, Orthodoxy is recognized today, in this country, as a constructive element and as a buttress for the support of Bulgarian national and cultural consciousness, despite the historical limitations of this function. Often its entire importance is reduced to this. The rôle of Orthodoxy in the formation of national identity is, without doubt, substantial. There are, however, certain limits within which Orthodoxy, with regard to a local Orthodox Church organized according to its national prerogatives, may be identified with the national characteristics of a specific people. The Orthodox East has always aspired to adopt and, through Grace, to transform spiritually those elements of a national culture which might enhance the spiritual incorporation of a particular people into the hegemony of Ecumenical Orthodoxy. But following the secularization of the national conscience in nineteenth-century Europe, our hierarchy of values was upset. The nation and its interests came to be seen as values and ends unto themselves. As a result of the ascendancy of values attached to secular national interests over those of religion and the Church, a secular spirit slowly overcame the consciences of Orthodox nations.

- To the secular researcher in the Humanities, Orthodoxy and Orthodox spirituality are historical and cultural phenomena, elements of which can, perhaps, be absorbed into the overall value system of a nation, but which serve no other purpose.

- A regrettably large number of the representatives of Orthodox theology have actually come to believe that theological thinking is a

kind of free intellectual activity, reducing Orthodoxy to a system of barren ideas; a form of intellectual speculation, similar to that of philosophy—socially “free,” “creative,” “posing problems,” alien to Orthodox spiritual life, and often marked by an inferiority complex before secular knowledge and its “authority.” In fact, he who understands Orthodox theology is he who lives in compliance with its doctrines. The epistemological foundation of the New Testament is this: He who loves God knows God (*cf.* I John 4:7-8), knows Him with a knowledge beyond intellectual knowledge, a knowledge in which man, in his true form, created after God and devoted to Him, takes an active part. Thus, the categorical imperative of the New Testament is: “Go through, that you may know.” Hence, he only is a theologian, in the “existential meaning of the word,” who lives in Christ *through* the Holy Spirit.

- As viewed from the vantage point of Roman Catholic “theological diplomacy,” Orthodoxy and its spirituality occupy an ostensibly *reputable*, yet provincial, position on the scale of spiritual and theological values, the positive end-point of which is the pitiable eminence of papal primacy and the absolute supremacy of the Latin Church as the “mother and teacher of all Churches.” The Vatican’s age-old hostility towards the scorned “Schismatics” of the East has at present put on an outer vestment woven of the unctuous vocabulary of the ecumenists. During the ‘60s, the Orthodox were no longer called “Schismatics,” but “separated brothers”; today they are simply “brothers”—who, however, regardless of their designation, still remain the object of Roman proselytism, which adapts to the prevailing winds.

- Staunchly entrenched in the Protestant innovation of the “adequacy of Scripture” and disallowing all that comes from Holy Tradition, modern Lutheran and Calvinist theologians consider Orthodoxy, on the whole, a conservative wing of non-Latin Christianity, a thing antiquated and fossilized in its liturgical solemnity. Save for a few sparks of insight, Protestantism, formed and rent by an extreme and, at times, even hysterical religious individualism, almost inevitably looks on Orthodox spiritual experiences as part of an outdated spiritual life and Orthodoxy, in its present-day ecclesiastical manifestation, as a kind of primitive religious parochialism.

Just how is it, then, that we can find the path that leads to Orthodox spirituality as a *living* tradition, that path which will enable us to realize this tradition and feel its unearthly spiritual beauty?

- First, this path is not to be found beyond the pale of the

Church, the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Orthodox Church of Christ—provided, of course, that we do not understand the Church to be a mere system of abstract theological or philosophical concepts or, conversely, understand it simply in terms of its tangible administrative functions or empirical social functions, but regard it as the essential realm of Orthodox spirituality itself and the theology which reflects that spirituality.

- Second, living contact with Orthodox spirituality demands personal effort, a struggle to “put off concerning the former conversation the old man” (Ephesians 4:22), spiritual agony, a mind prayerfully directed towards “the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ” (Colossians 2:2), and not towards the “traditions of men,” not after the “rudiments” of this world, but towards Christ (*cf.* Colossians 2:8).

- In the context in which it is here presented, Holy Tradition in the Orthodox Church is not simply what is preserved in human memory or a continuity of rites and customs, but is, above all, the perpetual action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Holy Tradition is the living presence of the Church, a presence that enables every member of Christ’s Body to hear, to perceive, and to know the Truth in its inherent light and not by way of the natural light of the human mind: “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 12:3). This tradition depends on no “philosophy,” on nothing that lives “after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Colossians 2:8). In the words of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow: “True and Holy Tradition is not only an actual and verbal handing-down of doctrines, rules, ordinance, and rites, but is also an invisible, real passing-on of Grace and sanctification.” Thus, in Holy Tradition there exist two intersecting and mutually inseparable lines, one horizontal and one vertical: the horizontal line of the “doctrines, rules, ordinances, and rites” handed down by Christ the Savior through the Apostles and the Holy Fathers; and the vertical line, the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit, of “Grace and sanctification,” in each and every word of the Truth revealed by God. In its vertical dimension, Holy Tradition does not posit mere formal, extraneous guarantees of the truths of our Faith, but makes manifest their intrinsic authenticity. It is not the Word Itself, as contained in revelation, but the celestial light that permeates the Word, the life-giving breath of the Sanctifier, Who enables us to hear both the Word Itself and the “silence whereof the Word comes,” in the words of St. Ignatios the God-Bearer.

The existential core of Orthodox spirituality as *living* tradition is precisely the Holy Spirit, the Third Hypostasis of the Triune God, and the Grace which He pours out—that uncreated Divine energy that is manifested in wondrous and multiple ways in those Baptized into Orthodoxy, commensurate with their voluntary, individual efforts to grow in the spiritual life by arduously transforming their Orthodox faith into deeds. As St. Symeon the New Theologian has written: “God the Word took flesh and became Man, that those who believe in Him as God-Man might receive in their souls the Holy Spirit as a soul..., and thus be regenerated and renovated, purifying their mind, conscience, and feelings through the Grace of the Holy Spirit.... Every Christian is obliged to labor in the feats of repentance, almsgiving, and the rest of the virtues, in order to attain to the Grace of the Holy Spirit and, through this Grace, to come to live the genuine life in Christ.” According to St. Macarios the Great, the Grace of the Holy Spirit, “continually abides, becomes rooted, and acts like leaven in man.... And this Dweller in man becomes a natural thing, something indispensable, as though of one essence with him.”

One can come into living contact with this Orthodox spirituality through the ascetic reification of one’s faith, through that Faith of the Gospel which holds firmly both to the witness of the Apostles and the theological testimony of the Holy Fathers.

Patristic theology is a spiritual and intellectual exposition of the Symbol of the Faith (the Creed), promulgated by the witness of the Apostles. It is, at the same time, the crystallized experience of Grace-filled Orthodox spirituality. The dogmatic postulates of the Fathers are essentially the same common witness that was delivered by Christ’s Apostles once and for all. This Apostolic witness is *preserved* not only in the Church, but it resides there as an “ever-increasing depository,” in the words of St. Irenæus of Lyons. Being a fruit of the ever-increasing depository of the Apostolic witness, Patristic teaching is, similarly, a constant standard of the Orthodox Faith, the highest measure of correct belief. It is for this reason that it is by far more essential to make reference to the Fathers than to seek historical evidence from the past. In Orthodox theology, references to the Fathers are no less important than references to Holy Writ. Moreover, these two things can never be separated. The Fathers themselves have always been servants of the Hypostatic Word and their theology is, thus, intrinsically exegetical.

One of the basic hallmarks of Patristic theology is also its existential nature. The Fathers theologized, in the expression of St. Gregory

the Theologian, “in an Apostolic way” (literally, “like fishermen”) and not in an Aristotelian fashion. Their theology forms an “epistle,” in the New Testamental sense of that word, that is, a revelation of the Apostolic witness, but now through the language of Hellenic categorical thinking, language transfigured and recoded within the light of Thabor. In the final analysis, the object of this theology is faith, a spiritual interpretation of faith, not a neutral, intellectual one. Without the life in Christ, theology lacks cogency; and if it is detached from a living faith, it can easily degenerate into a futile dialectic, into aimless verbosity. Patristic theology has always been rooted in a living faith and in living spiritual experience. And for this reason, and none other, it constitutes the sole path to living Orthodox spirituality.

The theology of the Holy Fathers is not a self-sufficient, self-expository science that can be set forth in a system of arguments—that is, in an Aristotelian manner—, unless it is backed up by the spiritual devotion of one who thirsts after God and His Truth. This sort of theology can be “preached,” but not “taught” in a scholastic or academic manner. It echoes in the words of the Church’s prayers; it is depicted in Icons; it lives within our rites of worship; it pulsates with the rhythm of the life of the Church’s Mysteries. This kind of theology cannot exist outside a life of prayer, outside of its proper liturgical context, and without personal ascetic growth in the Christian virtues. Effectively, there is no theology without spiritual experience, without an eagerness for the perfection of the Gospel. “The height of purity is the beginning of theology,” according to St. John of the Ladder (Klimakos).

On the other hand, theology is merely propædeutic. Its ultimate goal is to testify through word and deed to the Mystery of the living God. Theology is not an end in itself; it is only a means to an end. It constitutes a particular portrayal of the Truth revealed by God, the intellectual affirmation of which Truth it is. This delineation is indisputably necessary; but only the afflatus of the pure faith of the Gospel impregnates it with vivid significance. Thus it is that Patristic theology, though nothing more than crystallized faith, a crystallized experience of the life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, is the path by which one comes to the *actual experience of Orthodox spirituality*; that is, it is the means by which we come to partake, through universal Grace, in the life of the Orthodox Church; or, in other words, a path by which we encounter Orthodox spirituality as a *living* tradition.