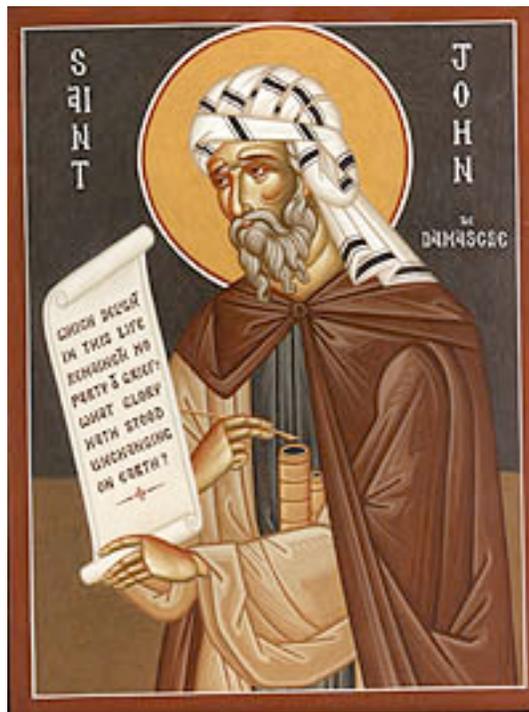


Is Orthodoxy a Religion?

by **Fr. John Romanides**

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Many are of the opinion that Orthodoxy is just one religion among many and that its chief concern is to prepare the members of the Church for life after death, securing a place in paradise for every Orthodox Christian. Orthodox doctrine is presumed to offer some additional guarantee, because it is Orthodox, and not believing in Orthodox dogma is seen as yet another reason for someone to go to Hell, besides his personal sins that

would otherwise send him there. Those Orthodox Christians who believe that this describes Orthodoxy have associated Orthodoxy exclusively with the afterlife. But in this life such people do not accomplish very much. They just wait to die, believing that they will go to paradise for the simple reason that while they were alive they were Orthodox Christians.

Another section of the Orthodox is involved with and active in the Church, interested not in the next life, but chiefly in this life, here and now. What interests them is how Orthodoxy can help them to have a good life in the present. These Orthodox Christians pray to God, have priests say prayers for them, have their homes blessed with holy water, have services of supplication sung, are anointed with oil, and so forth, all so that God will help them to enjoy life in the present: so that they do not get sick, so that their children find their place in society, so that their daughters are ensured a good dowry and a good groom, so that their boys find good girls to marry with good dowries, so that their work goes well, so that their businesses go well, even so that the stock market goes well, or the industry they work in, and so on. So we see that these Christians are not so very different from other people who follow other religions, for those people do the very same things.(1)

From what we have said, we can clearly see that Orthodoxy has two points in common with all other religions. First, it prepares believers for life after death, so that they will go to paradise, whatever they imagine that to be. Second, Orthodoxy protects them in this life so that they will not have to experience

sorrow, difficulties, disaster, sickness, war, and the like – in other words, so that God will take care of all their needs and desires. Thus, for this second type of Orthodox Christian, religion plays a major role in the present life and on a daily basis at that.

But among all these Christians we have just discussed, who cares deep down whether God exists or not? Who really yearns for Him and seeks Him out? The question of God's existence does not even come up, since it is clearly better for God to exist, so that we can appeal to Him and ask Him to satisfy our needs, in order for our work to go well and for us to have some happiness in this life. As we can see, human beings have an extremely strong predisposition to want God to exist and to believe that God exists, because we have a need for God to exist in order to ensure everything we have mentioned. Since we need God to exist, therefore, God exists. If people were not in need of a God and could take measures to ensure sufficiency for the necessities of life by some other means, then who knows how many would still believe in God. This is what happens in Greece as a rule.

So we see that many people who were previously indifferent to religion become religious towards the end of their lives, perhaps after some event that has frightened them. This happens because they feel that they cannot live any longer without appealing to some god for help – that is, it is the result of superstitious beliefs. For these reasons, human nature encourages man to be religious. This holds true not only for Orthodox Christians, but also for adherents to all religions. Human nature is the same

everywhere. Since as a result of the Fall the human soul is now darkened, people are by nature inclined toward superstition.

Now the next question is this: **Where does superstition stop and real belief begin?**

The Fathers' views and teachings on these matters are clear.

Consider first someone who follows, or rather thinks that he follows the teachings of Christ, simply by going to Church every Sunday, communing at regular intervals, and having the priest bless him with water, anoint him with oil and so on, without examining these things very closely.(2) Does this person who remains at the letter of the law, but does not enter into the spirit of the law, stand to gain anything of any account from Orthodoxy? Now consider someone who prays exclusively for the future life, for himself and for others, but is completely indifferent towards this life. Again, what particular benefit does such a person stand to gain from Orthodoxy? The former tendency can be seen in parish priests and those who flock around them with the attitude described above. The latter tendency can be seen in some elders in monasteries, usually retired archimandrites waiting to die, and the few monks who follow them. (3)

Since purification and illumination are not their main focus or concern, both these tendencies, from the viewpoint of the Fathers, have set the wrong goals for themselves. But insofar as purification and illumination become their focus and the Orthodox asceticism of the Fathers is practiced with a view towards

attaining noetic prayer, then and only then can everything else be placed on a firm foundation. These two tendencies are exaggerations that reflect two extremes and share no common core. But there is a common core, a structure that runs throughout Orthodoxy and holds it together. When we take into account this one core, this unique structure, then every subject that concerns Orthodoxy finds its proper place on a firm foundation. And this core is purification, illumination, and theosis.

What will happen to man after death was not an overriding concern for the Fathers. Their primary concern was what will man become in this life. After death, his nous cannot be treated. The treatment must begin in this life, because “in hades there is no repentance.”(4) This is why Orthodox theology is not outside of this world, futuristic, or eschatological, but is clearly grounded in this world, because Orthodoxy’s focus is man in this world and in this life, not after death.

Now why do we need purification and illumination? Is it so that we can go to Heaven and escape Hell? Is that why they are necessary? What are purification and illumination and why do Orthodox Christians want to attain them? In order to find the reason for this and to answer these questions, you need to have what Orthodox theology considers the basic key to these issues.

The basic key is the fact that, according to Orthodox theology, everyone throughout the world will finish their earthly course in the same way, regardless of whether they are Orthodox, Buddhist, Hindu, agnostic, atheist, or anything else. Everyone on

earth is destined to see the glory of God. At the Second Coming of Christ, with which all human history ends, everyone will see the glory of God. And since all people will see God's glory, they will all meet the same end. Truly, all will see the glory of God, but not in the same way – for some, the glory of God will be an exceedingly sweet Light that never sets; for others, the same glory of God will be like “a devouring fire” that will consume them. We expect this vision of God's glory to occur as a real event. This vision of God – of His Glory and His Light – is something that will take place whether we want it to happen or not. But the experience of that Light will be different for both groups.

Therefore, it is not the Church's task to help us see this glory, since that is going to happen anyway. The work of the Church and of her priests focuses on how we will experience the vision of God, and not whether we will experience the vision of God. The Church's task is to proclaim to mankind that the true God exists, that He reveals Himself as Light or as a devouring fire, and that all of humanity will see God(5) at the Second Coming of Christ. Having proclaimed these truths, the Church then tries to prepare Her members so that on that day they will see God as Light, and not as fire.(6)



When the Church prepares her members and everyone who desires to see God as Light, She is essentially offering them a curative course of treatment that must begin and end in this life. The treatment must take place during this life and be brought to completion, because there is no repentance after death. This curative course of treatment is the very fiber of Orthodox tradition and the primary concern of the Orthodox Church. It consists of three stages of spiritual ascent: purification from the passions, illumination by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and theosis, again by the grace of the Holy Spirit. We should also take note. If a

believer does not reach a state of at least partial illumination in this life, he will not be able to see God as Light either in this life or in the next.(7)

It is obvious that the Church Fathers were interested in people as they are today at this moment. Every human being needs to be healed. Every human being is also responsible before God to begin this process today in this life, because now is when it is possible, not after death. Everyone must decide for himself whether or not he will pursue this path of healing.

Christ said, “I am the Way.”(8) But where does this Way lead? Christ is not referring to the next life. Christ is primarily the Way in this life. Christ is the Way to His Father and our Father. First, Christ reveals Himself to man in this life and shows him the path to the Father. This path is Christ Himself. If a man does not see Christ in this life, at least by sensing Him in his heart, he also will not see the Father or the Light of God in the life to come.(9)

NOTES:

(1) As we noted in the Prologue, Father John’s words are at times *caustic*.

(2) Of course, genuine Orthodox Christians do these same things and it is not wrong for them to desire to do them. The problem is when someone stagnates at this level.

(3) As a rule, this is seen when the spiritual father and his monks are not interested in hesychasm.

(4) St. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book II, Chapter IV.

(5) Of course, all people have a partial experience of this vision of God immediately after the departure of the soul from the body at their biological death.

(6) “In the fire of revelation on the final day, the deeds of each will be tested by fire as Paul says. If what one has built up for himself is a work of incorruptibility, it will remain incorruptible in the midst of the fire and not only will it not be burned up, but it will be made radiant, totally purified of the perhaps small amount of filth...” St. Nikitas Stithatos, “On Spiritual Knowledge,” §79, *The Philokalia*, vol. III, page 348 [in Greek] [in English, page 165].

(7) “We have fallen so far from the vision of Him, corresponding to the dimness of our sight, since we have voluntarily deprived ourselves of His Light in this present life.” St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Extant Works*, Discourse 75 [in Greek].

(8) John 14:6.

(9) “...At Christ’s Second Coming, all mankind will be raised and will be judged according to their works. The sinners who

did not acquire spiritual eyes will not cease to exist. They will continue to exist ontologically as persons, but they will not participate in God. The righteous will both participate in God and commune with Him. As Saint Maximos the Confessor teaches, the sinners will live with an ‘eternal lack of well being,’ while the righteous will live in a state of ‘eternal well being.’” Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, *The Person in Orthodox Tradition* (Levadia: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1994), p. 162 [in Greek].