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Eastern Orthodoxy

The Eastern Orthodox Church – SYNOPSIS



Recent years have witnessed a surge of Western Christians joining the Orthodox Church. With its emphasis on mystical union with God, its rich history, and its beautiful icons (sacred images) and liturgies, Orthodoxy appeals to those who long for a deeper sense of wonder in their worship and faith. Yet behind the appeal lie some hard realities. The Orthodox world is not monolithic, and one cannot become Orthodox in general. The Orthodox tradition is not entirely apostolic, and consequently the claim to represent the true church of Christ is triumphalistic. Orthodoxy follows a different theological paradigm; for example, within Orthodoxy the doctrine of salvation has a different meaning than within Catholicism or Protestantism. Protestant evangelicals who have joined the Orthodox church often display an inadequate understanding of the faith they have embraced.

In 1987, some 2,000 laypersons and clergy from 17 churches, including Lutherans, Pentecostals, Baptists, Independents, and others, embraced the Orthodox faith.¹ These new converts explained that the day they joined the Orthodox church was the glorious end of a long journey to find the true church of Christ. In the foreword to Peter Gillquist's book, *Becoming Orthodox*, Bishop Maximos Agiorgoussis argued, "The researchers had no difficulty in realizing that...the only body which meets the criteria of the Church founded by Christ, the Church of apostolic tradition, faith and practice, is today's Holy Orthodox Church of Christ."²

Metropolitan Philip Saliba, head of the Antiochian Orthodox Churches of North America, hailed the event as having historic significance: "Not in your lifetime, not in my lifetime, have we ever witnessed such a mass conversion to Holy Orthodoxy." Then he added, "Last week I said to evangelicals, 'Welcome home!' Today I am saying, 'Come home, *America!* Come home to the faith of Peter and Paul.'"³

Another speaker proclaimed, "Our fathers embraced this Orthodox Christian faith and brought it to America. Now it's our turn to bring America — and the West — to Orthodox Christianity."⁴ Since 1987 many others have followed the Eastern trail. Some well-known apologists of this new trend are urging the Orthodox to mount a crusade to win America to Christ.⁵ Reading such claims, one cannot avoid asking if such statements are based on solid historical and theological arguments or if this movement is yet another religious diversion.

The Eastern Orthodox Church – ORTHODOX FAITH OR FAITHS?

In *Becoming Orthodox*, Peter Gillquist asserts, "The Orthodox church...miraculously carries today the same faith and life of the Church of the New Testament."⁶ The presupposition behind this statement is that the Orthodox church is a unified body that speaks with one voice. In fact, Orthodoxy is not a monolithic bloc that shares a unified tradition and church life. The phrase "Eastern Orthodoxy," commonly used to describe the Orthodox faith, actually refers to the dominant churches of Eastern Europe. In a broad sense, the Eastern tradition comprises all the Christian churches that separated at an early stage from the Western tradition (Rome) in order to follow one of the ancient patriarchies (Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople).

During the twentieth century, these churches not only have spread throughout all continents, but also have penetrated many cultures that have not been traditionally associated with the Eastern tradition. Generally speaking, these churches can be grouped into one of the following:

1. *The Orthodox churches in the Middle East.* These belong to the most ancient oriental ecclesiastical units, and they include the Patriarchies of Constantinople (modern Istanbul), Alexandria (Egypt), Antioch (Syria and Lebanon), Jerusalem (Jordan and the occupied territories), the Armenian Catholicossates of Etchmiadzin (former Soviet Republic) and Cilicia (Lebanon), the Coptic Orthodox church (Egypt), and the Syrian Orthodox church (Syria, Beirut, and India).⁷

2. *The Orthodox Churches in Central and Eastern Europe.* Both culturally and theologically, these churches follow closely the Byzantine (Constantinopolitan) tradition. Generally known as "Eastern Orthodoxy," they include the autonomous churches of Russia, Romania, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Albania, and Sinai.⁸

3. *The Orthodox Diaspora.* Organized outside the traditional Orthodox countries, these ecclesiastical communities are found in Western Europe, North and South America, Africa, Japan, China, and Australia.

These churches have significant theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural differences among themselves. For example, the fifth-century Monophysite controversy over whether Christ has two natures or one separated the Byzantine church from the ancient Eastern churches. Furthermore, the Eastern churches disagree on the date for Easter and the legitimacy of church hierarchy and sacraments. As a result of such differences, the Eastern churches have parallel ecclesiastical structures not only in the same country but even in the same city, thus disregarding the rule of one bishop in one city.

Culturally, in addition to differing local liturgical traditions, the link between church and nation that became characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy led to the founding of churches on ethnic principles. Most of the churches understand themselves as the real protector of their individual nations, people, and cultures. Despite political benefits, the church-nation relationship raises questions regarding the universality and the unity of the church, particularly in times of political or military tension between nations supported by sister Orthodox churches.

Despite triumphalistic claims of Orthodox apologists that they embody the true apostolic faith, in reality there is a cluster of conflicting traditions, theologies, and ecclesiastical structures. Protestant evangelicals in America who were eager to embrace the Orthodox faith soon discovered that Orthodox churches in America are divided. In fact, their liturgies are spoken in their national languages and they are hesitant to welcome outsiders.⁹ For example, Frank Schaeffer, a passionate promoter of Orthodoxy, concluded that one side of the Orthodox church in America is a “sort of social-ethnic club,” infected with nominalism, materialism, ethnic pride, exclusivism, and indifference to the sacraments.¹⁰

The Eastern Orthodox Church – IS THE ORTHODOX FAITH APOSTOLIC?

Like evangelical Protestants, the Orthodox believe all theological knowledge is based upon God’s self-revelation. The Orthodox, however, argue that this revelation is conveyed to the world not only through Scripture but also through Apostolic Tradition; that is, Christ entrusted the divine revelation to the apostles, and they entrusted it to the church, which became the custodian and the interpreter of revelation. This heritage, or *Deposit of Faith*, is not to be understood as a set of normative doctrines but as a new reality or new life made available to the world by the incarnation of the Word and through the operation of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Generally speaking, the Orthodox hierarchy affirms that the Orthodox churches have kept the *Deposit of Faith* undistorted, just as the apostolic church received it.¹² Under the influence of modern scholarship, however, a growing number of Orthodox theologians affirm that the Apostolic Tradition underwent transformations in the process of transmission and interpretation that resulted in the formation of a distinct ecclesiastical (church) tradition. Although these two traditions are not mutually exclusive, the Greek Orthodox theologian C.Konstantinidis, who is very active within the ecumenical movement, asserts that the “Apostolic Tradition is also ecclesial, but the ecclesiastical is large enough to contain some other forms of tradition, which are forms of tradition *in the Church*, but not directly apostolic.”¹³ This raises questions about the distinction between the two forms of tradition: Apostolic and ecclesiastical.

While all Orthodox scholars agree on the concept of the Apostolic Tradition, they disagree concerning both the mode of transmission and the content of what has been handed down. Generally speaking, there are two theories that attempt to explain this process: first, the “two-source” theory, which has been dominant in the Orthodox world since the Middle Ages; and second, the “one-source” theory, which is widely accepted among Orthodox scholars who participate in the ecumenical dialogue.

The “Two-Source” Approach

The Roman Catholic church at the Council of Trent (1546-1563) declared that “both saving truth and moral discipline” are “contained in the written books and the unwritten traditions, and it belongs to holy mother church...to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.”¹⁴ This declaration strongly influenced the two-source approach.

Similarly, the Orthodox claim that the content of revelation has been transmitted in the Scriptures *and* the Holy Tradition. The 1962 *Almanac* of the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America states, “Eternal truths are expressed in the Holy Scripture and the Sacred Tradition, both of which are equal and are represented pure and unadulterated by the true Church established by Christ to continue His mission: man’s salvation.”¹⁵ Advocates of this view argue that the church received revelation in the form of oral tradition, which was prior to Scripture and from which the content of the New Testament was compiled. Since the New Testament does not contain the *whole* revelation, the church has guarded the Deposit of Faith both in the written and unwritten tradition of the Word of God. The last of the inspired apostles completed the written tradition that formed the canon of the New Testament. Meanwhile, the unwritten tradition has been preserved in the church “first orally and then in the form of the literary monuments, as the great Tradition of the Church.”¹⁶ Konstantinidis continues, “Only in a perspective such as this can one understand why we, Orthodox, consider Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition as two sources of revelation of equal weight and authority, as two equivalent sources of dogma and of supernatural faith.”¹⁷

In other words, neither Scripture nor Tradition independently contain all the facts of revelation or the key for accurate interpretation of those facts. Archbishop Michael of the Greek Archdiocese of North and South America asserts: “There exists in Tradition elements which, although not mentioned in the New Testament as they are in the Church today, are indispensable to the salvation of our souls.”¹⁸ This approach claims that there is no conflict between these two sources. Indeed, they are viewed as complementary because both are legitimate expressions of the source of ultimate authority — that is, the self-disclosure of God. Yet Konstantinidis distinguishes between the Holy Tradition, which concerns the faith and has the same authority as Scripture, and the ecclesiastical tradition, which is changeable and has only relative authority. Such a distinction requires further clarification concerning the origin, content, and theological use of the ecclesiastical tradition.

The “One-Source” Approach

Other Orthodox theologians repudiate the two-source view on the grounds that it introduces an unnecessary dichotomy. The 1976 Moscow Agreed Statement (between Anglicans and Orthodox) says, “Any disjunction between Scripture and Tradition such as would treat them as two separate ‘sources of revelation’ must be rejected. The two are correlative...Holy Tradition completes Holy Scripture...By the term Holy Tradition we understand the entire life of the Church in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹

According to this view, Holy Scripture is simply part of the Holy Tradition. Nevertheless, this approach calls for clarification concerning the relationship between Tradition and Scripture. Orthodox scholar Timothy Ware (who at his ordination as an Orthodox priest in 1966 received the name Kallistos Ware), for instance, argues that the church must decide this issue because Scripture is not an authority set up *over* the church, but lives and is understood *within* the church. “Scripture owes its authority to the Church. It is the Church likewise that alone constitutes the authoritative interpretation of the Bible...the decisive criterion for our understanding of

Scripture is *the mind of the Church*.”²⁰

Yet, as Orthodox theologian E. Clapsis asserts, even when Orthodox scholars agree that the church is the only agency to give authentic interpretation to Scripture, disagreements continue concerning the *how* of this interpretation.²¹ Despite such disagreements, all Orthodox scholars believe the church has absolute authority to interpret and teach God’s revelation. The teaching organ of the church is the episcopate (bishops) individually and in councils. Their teaching is authoritative because it is grounded in the *infallibility* of the church.²²

If the Orthodox church is infallible, the teachings of its churches must necessarily be consistent and coherent. To determine whether this is the case we need to investigate the content of Tradition.

The Eastern Orthodox Church – The Content of Tradition

Orthodox scholars do not always speak the same language when they refer to the content of Tradition. This is true not only between adherents of the one-source and two-source approach but also among those who belong to the same trend.

Konstantinidis and Archbishop Michael, for example, belong to the two-source trend, and yet disagree concerning the content of Tradition. Konstantinidis affirms that Tradition includes: (1) the valid and authentic interpretation of Scripture in the church; (2) official formulations and confessions of faith; (3) the formulations, definitions, and creeds of the Ecumenical Councils; (4) the larger accords of the teachings of the Fathers and ecclesiastical authors (*Consensus Patrum*); and (5) the forms, acts, and institutions and liturgies of the early church. Everything else can be ecclesiastical tradition, but “not the Holy Tradition of dogma and saving faith.”²³ Except for the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils, however, the Eastern Orthodox church has never formally accepted the points in Konstantinidis’s diagram. Moreover, after the Council of Chalcedon (451), the non-Byzantine Eastern churches did not participate in the councils considered ecumenical by the Byzantine Orthodox.

Alternatively, Archbishop Michael affirms that the oral tradition was handed on “from generation to generation until it was embodied and codified in the works of the major Fathers of the Church and in the resolutions of the seven Ecumenical and the ten local synods of the Church.”²⁴ Since Archbishop Michael indicates neither who are the major Fathers nor which are the ten local councils, it is again impossible to distinguish between the Apostolic and ecclesiastical traditions. In the absence of such clarification, the church runs the risk of placing the canonical Scriptures on the same footing with a supplementary body of teachings and practices and of ascribing apostolic authority to certain teachings and practices that could well have merely ecclesiastical origin.²⁵

Similar disagreements exist among those who follow the one-source theory. Ware asserts that Tradition includes: (1) the Bible, (2) the Seven Ecumenical Councils and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, (3) local councils, (4) the Fathers, (5) the liturgy, (6) canon law (officially established church rules governing faith and practice), and (7) icons.²⁶ In order to avoid conflicting authorities within Tradition, he proposes a “hierarchy” of Tradition within the church. The contemporary church is the final authority in interpreting the Scriptures, the later councils, and the Fathers, while the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils are taken as irrevocable.²⁷ He considers the liturgy and icons beyond any question, while canon law is subject to change by the contemporary church.²⁸

Alternatively, other adherents of the one-source approach argue, “By the term Holy Tradition we understand the entire life of the Church in the Holy Spirit. This tradition expresses itself in dogmatic teachings, in liturgical worship, in canonical discipline, and in spiritual life.”²⁹

Clapsis notes, “The Orthodox Church has only a small number of dogmatic definitions, forming the profession of faith obligatory for all its members. Strictly speaking, this minimum consists of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is read during baptismal service and the liturgy, and the definitions of the seven ecumenical councils.”³⁰ Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff, however, adopts a less concise approach: “The Orthodox, when asked positively about the sources of their faith, answer in such concepts as the whole of Scripture, seen in the light of the tradition of the ancient Councils, the Fathers, and the faith of the entire people of God, expressed particularly in the liturgy. This appears to the outsiders as nebulous, perhaps romantic or mystical, and in any case inefficient and unrealistic.”³¹

As we’ve seen, despite this bewildering variety of views, Orthodox scholars agree that certain teachings and practices are not apostolic. Ware asserts, “Not everything received from the past is of equal value, nor is everything received from the past necessarily true. As one of the bishops remarked at the Council of Carthage in 257 ‘The Lord said, I am the truth. He did not say, I am the custom.’”³²

Rather than sorting through its heritage, the Orthodox church has preferred to hide behind the claim that the Holy Spirit guards it from errors. Hence, they fail to argue their claims effectively, whether historically or theologically. Moreover, Orthodox theologians avoid systematic formulation of their teachings, choosing instead a different approach to theology than that of Western Christianity.

The Eastern Orthodox Church – EAST AND WEST: TWO APPROACHES TO THEOLOGY

As early as the second century, East and West developed distinct approaches to theology. The Western theological paradigm is creation-fall-redemption, while the Eastern is creation-deification, or *theosis*.

Under the influence of Augustine’s interpretation of the apostle Paul, the West developed its theology on the legal relationship between God and humankind. This underlines the doctrine of justification with its implications for the Catholic doctrines of church, ministry, and canon law.³³

Moreover, the Protestant Reformation emphasized the legal (forensic) aspect of humanity’s relationship with God in its doctrines of the Fall and sin (transgression of God’s law) and salvation (Christ’s fulfilling the law in place of sinners and taking upon Himself its just penalty in their behalf so His own righteousness could be legally transferred [imputed] to them). Salvation cannot be earned or merited but is received by faith apart from good works. In order to be saved, each person needs to repent and trust in Christ.³⁴

Alternatively, the East developed a mystical approach to theology: God cannot be known intellectually but only experientially. This approach to theology, known as the negative way, affirms that God is above human language and reason. “The negative way of the knowledge of God is an ascendant undertaking of the mind that progressively eliminates all positive attributes of the object it wishes to attain, in order to culminate finally in a kind of apprehension by supreme ignorance of Him who cannot be an object of knowledge.”³⁵

In other words, God is a mystery. This means that He is beyond our intellectual comprehension. He is totally and “wholly other,” not only invisible but inconceivable.³⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius (c.late fifth, early sixth

centuries), the father of the negative way, explains it by pointing to Moses' ascent on the mountain in order to meet God:

It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with the rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by the chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascent. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells... Here renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.³⁷

Here, the emphasis lies not on developing theological systems but on the mystical union between God and the believer in the absence of all intellectual knowledge.³⁸ The purpose of theological knowledge and church practice (e.g., the sacraments) is to help the faithful attain mystical union with God or deification (*theosis*).

The Eastern Orthodox Church – The Doctrine of God

In Orthodoxy, God is absolutely transcendent. This means God alone has existence in Himself, and He is separated from everything that exists outside Himself. Moreover, whatever exists “outside” God has not eternally co-existed with God as in monistic emanationist and dualistic philosophies, but has its existence in God's free will act of creation and providence. Ware argues that this absolute transcendence of God is affirmed by the “way of negation.” Positive statements about God — such as God is good, wise, and just — are true as far as they go; yet they cannot adequately describe the inner nature of the deity.³⁹ Although it is clear that God does exist, the mystery of His essence is beyond our intellectual capacities. Yet the Orthodox also believe God acts and intervenes directly in concrete historical situations.

In order to safeguard the absolute transcendence *and* the immanence of God, Orthodox theology distinguishes three aspects of God's being: (1) the indescribable and inaccessible divine essence (*ousia*); (2) the three divine Persons (*hypostases*); and (3) the uncreated energies (*energeiai*) inseparable from God's essence (as are the rays of the sun from the sun itself) in which He manifests, communicates, and gives Himself.⁴⁰

Comparing this with other Christian traditions, Ware concludes, “Those brought up in other traditions have sometimes found it difficult to accept the Orthodox emphasis on the apophatic [negative] theology and the distinction between essence and energies. Yet apart from these two matters, Orthodox agree with the overwhelming majority of all who call themselves Christians. Monophysites and Lutherans, Restrains and Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Anglicans, and Orthodox: All alike worship one God in Three Persons and confess Christ as Incarnate Son of God.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, these differences have significant implications for the doctrines of creation, sin, and salvation.

The Eastern Orthodox Church – The Doctrine of Creation

The Orthodox church believes in *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing); that is, God alone has existence in Himself; everything else has its existence through Him. Eastern Christianity believes the whole creation came into existence because of a free and loving act of the Triune God. Despite the fact that the Orthodox church never systematized its doctrine of the relationship between the Creator and creation, it seems the views of

Athanasius and Maximus the Confessor⁴² are generally endorsed.

Athanasius distinguished between the *will* of God and the *nature* of God. Creation is an act of His will. God is free to create or not to create, and He remains transcendent to the world. By nature the Father generates the Son, who is not a creature but shares the same nature (*ousia*) with the Father.⁴³

Divine nature and created nature are separate and dissimilar modes of existence. Creatures exist “by the grace of His grace, His will, and His word...so that they even cease to exist if the Creator so wishes.”⁴⁴ The doctrine of Creation as expressed by Athanasius leads to a distinction in God between His transcendent essence and His properties, such as power or goodness. As Meyendorff puts it, “Because *God is what he is*, He is not determined or in any way limited in what He *does*, not even by His own essence and being.”⁴⁵ God’s creative act brought into being another *nature* distinct from His own and worthy of God’s love and concern and fundamentally “very good.”

To express the relationship between the Creator and creation, Maximus borrowed the Neo-Platonic⁴⁶ concepts of *logos* and *logoi*. The divine *Logos* (Reason) is the center and the living unity of the *logoi* (reasons) of creation. The temporal existence of created beings centers in the one *Logos*. Every created thing is endowed with its “energy” or movement. Meyendorff asserts, “The proper movement of nature, however, can be fully itself only if [it] follows its proper goal (*skopos*), which consists in striving for God, entering into communion with Him, and thus fulfilling the *logos*, or divine purpose, through which and for which it is created.”⁴⁷

Creatures do not simply receive their form and diversity from God; He has also given them an energy of their own. This leads to the theory of the “double movement,” that is, through the Divine *Logos* the Creator moves toward creation and through its *logoi* creation moves toward its Creator. In its natural condition creation is not opposed to God, but moves toward Him in order to participate in God’s uncreated energies; that is, to be deified or to attain to its perfection. This co-operation reaches a special level in man, who was created in the image of God.

The Eastern Orthodox Church – Was Adam a Child or a Perfect Man?

The presupposition underlying the Orthodox doctrine of man is that man was made for “participation” in God. The biblical account of creation of man after the *image* and the *likeness* of God is interpreted within Orthodoxy as indicating two different aspects of human beings. John of Damascus believed “the expression *according to the image* indicates rationality and freedom, while the expression *according to the likeness* indicates assimilation to God through virtue.”⁴⁸

The image (Greek: *icon*) of God signifies everything (free will, reason, moral responsibility) that separates man out from the animal creation and makes him a *person*. Moreover, Ware argues that the image means that “we are God’s ‘offspring’ (Acts 17:28), His kin; it means that between us and Him there is a point of contact, an essential similarity.”⁴⁹ The gulf between Creator and creation can thus be bridged. Proper use of this faculty for communion with God leads to *deification*.

Image, then, refers to that aspect God placed in people from the beginning. Likeness, on the other hand, is a goal toward which they must aim. Ware concludes, “However sinful a man may be, he never loses the image; but the likeness depends upon our moral choice, upon our ‘virtue,’ and so it is destroyed by sin.”⁵⁰

Orthodoxy follows the third-century father Irenaeus, who believed that Adam “was a child, not yet having his understanding perfected. It was necessary that he should grow and so come to his perfection.”⁵¹ In other words, Adam was not a perfect human being but was endowed with the potential for perfection. Consequently, the doctrine of the Fall into sin is not as dramatic in Orthodoxy as in the Western tradition.

In order to explain their minimalist view of sin, Orthodox theologians distinguish between nature and person. Man’s participation in God is always in accord with his nature. According to Maximus, man had to follow only the law of his own nature because it conforms to his true destiny to be in communion with God. As person, man has the freedom of moral choice, and this is the seat of the potential for sinning.⁵²

According to Maximus, when man fell, Adam abandoned what was natural. Instead, under the devil’s influence, man completely gave himself to his senses (freedom of choice) and consequently his relationship with God was affected. From here stem the first three capital evils: reason (*logos*) perverted into “ignorance” because man is isolated from God; desire perverted into sensual “self-love”; and temper perverted into hatred against one’s neighbor.⁵³ The negative consequences of sin are many, including mortality.⁵⁴ Yet Maximus argues that sin does not corrupt nature (and natural will), although he admits a sort of contamination of the natural will, which could will only good before the Fall.

The rebellion of Adam and Eve against God was their personal sin. This resulted in no inherited guilt for their descendants. Although the Orthodox emphasize the unity of humankind, this unity includes only hereditary death and not inherited guilt. Sinfulness is a consequence of mortality. By becoming mortal, man acquired a greater urge to sin because he is subject to the needs of the body (food, drink, etc.) which are absent in immortal beings.⁵⁵ Byzantine tradition views mortality as a cosmic disease that holds humanity under its sway. Death makes sin inevitable and in this sense “corrupts” nature. But Meyendorff argues that “neither original sin nor salvation can be realized in an individual’s life without involving his personal and free responsibility.”⁵⁶

The Eastern Orthodox Church – Not Justification by Faith but Deification through the Energies

Adam started like a child who was supposed to grow and become perfect.⁵⁷ God set Adam on the right path, but Adam’s fall essentially consisted in his disobedience to the will of God. Adam’s sin set up a barrier that man could never break down by his own efforts (not so much the legal barrier of sin as the existential barrier of mortality). Since man could not come to God, God came to man in the incarnation of Christ. The Incarnation (more so than the Atonement) reopened for man the path to God. Building upon Athanasius’s statement that “God became man that we might be made god,”⁵⁸ the Orthodox church explains salvation not in terms of justification but as mystical union with God.

Since God is transcendent, one might ask how union with God is possible. According to the Orthodox doctrine of salvation, union with God according to essence (nature, *ousia*) is impossible. Only the three Persons of the Godhead are united to each other in the divine essence. If such a union were possible, God would no longer be Trinity, but myriads of persons (hypostases) since there would be many persons participating in His essence.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky argues that although we share the same human nature as Christ and receive in Him the name of sons of God, we do not ourselves become the Son. Consequently, we cannot be part of the Holy Trinity.⁶⁰ Union with God is proper to the Son alone.

The energies or divine operations, on the other hand, are forces inseparable from God's essence in which He manifests Himself and communicates. Mystical union with God, therefore, is man's way of participating in the divine energies.⁶¹

Lossky asserts that the divine energies are outpourings of the divine nature.⁶² The energies represent God's mode of existence outside His inaccessible essence. According to this view, God has two modes of being — in His essence and outside His essence. The uncreated energies proceed from His nature and are inseparable, just as the rays of sun would shine out from the solar disk whether or not there were any beings capable of receiving its light.⁶³

The means whereby human beings participate in the divine energies are the sacraments and human effort.⁶⁴ The Orthodox stress on the sacraments as the means of deification (*theosis*) leads to the logical conclusion that *theosis* is impossible outside the church. Coniaris writes, "From the Church, Christ reaches out to us with the Sacraments to bring to us His grace and love. Every sacrament puts us in touch with Christ and applies to us the power of the Cross and the Resurrection. St. Leo the Great said, 'He who was visible as our Redeemer has now passed into the Sacraments.'...The Sacraments are the way to theosis."⁶⁵ Thus salvation or deification is possible only in and through the church, because "the Church and the Sacraments are the way to God, for the Church is in absolute reality the Body of Christ."⁶⁶

One is not supposed to try to understand the mode in which the sacraments mediate the divine energies because they are *mysteria*. Consequently, the emphasis is laid upon participation in the sacraments and not upon a personal relationship with Christ mediated through the study of Scripture.⁶⁷

Because the sacraments are *mysteria*, the Orthodox see no problem in the fact that during the patristic period the Eastern Fathers disagreed among themselves on the number and role of sacraments. Thus Theodore the Studite in the ninth century gives a list of six sacraments (baptism, the Eucharist, chrismation [the anointing of the newly baptized baby or convert], ordination, monastic tonsure, and the service of burial); Gregory Palamas named two (baptism and the Eucharist); and Nicholas Cabasilas listed three (baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist). The "seven sacraments" appear in the Middle Ages under the Roman Catholic influence and include baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, holy orders, matrimony, penance, and the anointing of the sick.⁶⁸

When confronted with these discrepancies, the Orthodox take refuge in the belief that what matters is that God's saving energies are mediated to man in the church. It is enough for the faithful to know that the church mediates the energies and that outside it there is no salvation.⁶⁹

Some Orthodox theologians lean toward the double-movement theory of Maximus and assert that the sacraments are not administered in a passive way: as God moves toward man, so man moves toward God. Man responds to the divine energies with his own energy. Between the two energies there is a "synergy."⁷⁰ The Orthodox reject any doctrine of grace that might infringe on man's freedom. Man cannot achieve full fellowship with God without God's help; yet he must also play his part. The path to deification includes asceticism, prayer, contemplation, and good works. The Orthodox believe the faithful are further helped along the way by icons, relics, saints, and above all by the Virgin Mary. When asked about the biblical grounds for this doctrine, the Orthodox respond that these teachings were received from the Tradition.

The Eastern Orthodox Church – "COMING HOME" – TO WHAT?

Coming home,” as Peter Gillquist puts it, is not a simple matter of arriving at the only true apostolic church, but rather a matter of choice between a number of Orthodox churches. Moreover, the Orthodox claim that they have preserved the Holy Tradition undistorted is contradicted by the disagreements between Orthodox theologians concerning Tradition.

Since man’s perceptive and rational faculties are understood as barriers in the way of deification, the Orthodox believe they have to be abandoned. Yet under the influence of the Platonic and Neo-Platonic categories, they make philosophical distinctions between God’s essence and energies. In teaching a mystical union between God and man, the Orthodox place the divine Persons into a kind of intermediary level between essence and energies.⁷¹ This doctrine moves the three divine Persons a step back from the work of salvation. Particularly, the offices of the Son and the Holy Spirit fade into the background as the mystical union with God is realized through impersonal energies.

Aware of this problem, Orthodox theologian Timiadis argues, “To a certain extent the dissatisfaction expressed at the use by the early Fathers of Aristotelian terms, and notably the desire to make less use of terms such as essence and energies, is very understandable. Whatever arguments may be advanced in their favour, they still risk being misunderstood on account of their impersonal character...A God who is reluctant to be with us, who sends us alternative powers and energies, contradicts the very sense of Christ’s Incarnation.”⁷²

The Orthodox view that Adam was a child and that his sin is to be understood merely as missing the road diminishes the gravity of sin and its consequences. Accordingly, Adam’s descendants inherited corruption and mortality, but not guilt. Each child remains innocent until he or she personally sins. According to Orthodox belief, baptism imparts new and immortal life, and since Orthodoxy practices infant baptism it follows that repentance and faith are not essential. Salvation understood mystically as deification and not as forensic justification by faith obscures the biblical records about Christ’s vicarious death.

Although it is clear from Peter Gillquist’s writings that he and his colleagues do not have a clear understanding of the Orthodox faith in its complexity, their claims to have discovered the true apostolic faith can mislead others, whose search for religious experience is influenced by limited knowledge and the current American hunger for mystical realities. A close look at Orthodoxy can help both the sincere searchers and the Orthodox churches themselves to avoid adding members to a romanticized, idealized church of the Western imagination rather than the real Orthodox churches.

notes

1. Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith*, rev ed. (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press,1992),175.
2. Maximus Agiorgoussis, “Foreword to the Revised Edition,” in Gillquist, viii-ix.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Ibid., 174.
5. See Bradley Nassif, “Evangelical Denomination Gains Official Acceptance into the Orthodox Church,” *Christianity Today*, 6 February 1987, 40, and Frank Schaeffer, *Dancing Alone: The Quest for Orthodox Faith in the Age of False Religions* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 310-15.

6. Gillquist, 57.
7. See I. Bria, *The Sense of Ecumenical Tradition* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), 5-12.
8. See T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1963), 9-16.
9. T. Weber, "Looking for Home: Evangelical Orthodoxy and the Search for the Original Church," in *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff*, ed. Bradley Nassif (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 119.
10. Schaeffer, 298-311.
11. Quoting Meyendorff in *The Orthodox Church*, 192.
12. Ware, 204.
13. C. Konstantinidis, "The Significance of the Eastern and Western Traditions within Christendom," in *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. C. Patalos (Geneva: WCC, 1978), 222.
14. Phillip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 80,82.
15. *1962 Almanac* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of North and South America, 1962), 195.
16. Konstantinidis, 222.
17. Ibid.
18. Archbishop Michael, "Orthodox Theology," *The Greek Theological Review* 3 (Summer 1957): 13.
19. "The Agreed Statement Adopted by the Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission at Moscow, 26 July to 2 August 1976," in *Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue*, ed. K. Ware and C. Davey (London: SPCK, 1977), 84.
20. K. Ware, "The Exercise of Authority in the Orthodox Church," *Ecclesia kai Theologia*, 946-47.
21. E. Clapsis, "Prolegomena to Orthodox Dogmatics: Bible and Tradition," *Diakonia* 16 (1981): 18.
22. G. Florovsky, "The authority of the Ancient Councils," in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, CA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972), 103.
23. Konstantinidis, 224.
24. Archbishop Michael, 13.
25. Bria (42) affirms that the history of the Orthodox church demonstrates how cultural context, missionary environment, forms of establishment, and other factors influence the reception or rejection of Christian tradition.
26. T. Ware, 207-15.

27. Ibid., 207-12.
28. Ibid., 213-14.
29. “The Moscow Agreed Statement,” 84.
30. Clapsis, 26.
31. John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), 100.
32. T. Ware, 205.
33. See Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith — A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 43.
34. S. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 528-99.
35. V. Lossky, *In the Image and the Likeness of God*, ed. J.H. Erickson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 13.
36. Bishop Maximus Aghiorgoussis, “East Meets West: Gifts of the Eastern Tradition to the Whole Church,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993): 4.
37. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* I 31000C-1001A in *The Complete Works*, tr. C. Luibheid (London: SPCK, 1987), 136-37.
38. Aghiorgoussis, “East Meets West,” 4.
39. T. Ware, 217.
40. Gregory Palamas, *Capita physica, theologica, moralia, et practica* 79PG1501173B; 11PG1501197A.
41. T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 218.
42. A Greek theologian and ascetic who served as Imperial Secretary under Emperor Heraclius, Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662) was a determined opponent of Monothelism — the belief that Jesus had only one will.
43. Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, III, 60; PG26: 448-49.
44. Ibid., I, 20; PG26: 55A.
45. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 130.
46. Neo-Platonism believed that the One (Absolute) lies beyond all experience. The One can be known by man only by the method of abstraction. Man must gradually divest his experience of all that is specifically human, so that in the end, when all attributes have been removed, only God (the One) is left.

47. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 138.
48. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, II, 12 (G.XCIV, 920 B).
49. Ware, 224.
50. Ibid.
51. Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 12, as found in J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 4th ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 171.
52. Maximus the Confessor, *Epistles* 6.
53. C. Laga and C. Steel, eds., *Maximi Confessoris ad Thalassium I, questiones I-LV, una cum latina interpretatione Ianis Scottae Eriugenaee iuxta posita* (Thrnhout-Brepols: Leuven University Press, 1990), 29.
54. Maximus the Confessor, *The Ascetic Life: The Four Centuries on Charity*, PG90, 912 A.
55. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 145.
56. Ibid., 144.
57. Irenaeus, 12.
58. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.
59. V.Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clark, 1973), 69-70.
60. Ibid., 70.
61. Ibid., 71.
62. Ibid., 73.
63. Ibid., 74.
64. C. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought and Orthodox Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 150? 62.
65. A. Coniaris, *Introducing the Orthodox Church: Its Faith and Life* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1982), 123.
66. John Meyendorff, *St.Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 140.
67. Tsirpanlis, 107.
68. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 191-92.

69. T. Ware, 251.

70. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 164.

71. Paul Negrut, "Orthodox Soteriology: *Theosis*," *Churchman* 109 (1995): 166.

72. E. Timiadis, "God's Immutability and Communicability," in *Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Churches*, vol.1, ed. T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 45-46.



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