



The Sickness of Religion and its Orthodox Cure

Orthodoxy and Religion*

by Father John Romanides (+)

*On the occasion of the
fifth anniversary of his repose,
November 1, 2001*



PEOPLE have begun writing articles of late about the relationship between Orthodoxy and religion.

It is a fact that, after the first few centuries [of Christianity], our Faith has also been characterized as a religion. But in what sense is it a religion?

Plutarch equates religion with worship. Orthodoxy certainly does involve worship, but it is not a mere “community of worship.” It is a Church and the Body of Christ.

Nowhere in the New Testament is the Church characterized as a religion, but rather as a “way,” (Acts 9:2); that is, as a path and way of life, which leads to union with Christ, to deification. The ultimate “way” is Christ Himself (St. John 14:62).

Can Christianity [Orthodoxy], then, not be characterized as a religion? Yes, it can, but not in the way that the world’s various faiths—even so-called monotheistic faiths—understand religion.

Hence, before we end up with inadmissible disputes over a [Patristically] non-existent subject, let us listen to the pertinent teaching of an unquestionably great dogmatician, Father John Romanides.

We are reprinting the following texts by Father John as a pious tribute to his memory (November 1, 2001).

Father George Metallinos

Part I¹

1. Orthodoxy Is Not a Religion

MANY people are under the impression that Orthodoxy is one of many religions and that it is primarily concerned with preparing the members of the Church for life after death; that is, with securing a place in Paradise for every Orthodox Christian.

Thus, they reckon that Orthodox doctrine offers an additional guaranty (because it is Orthodox), and that if someone does not believe in Orthodox doctrine, this serves as just one more reason for this person to go to Hell—apart, that is, from the fact that his personal sins will in all probability send him there.

Any Orthodox Christian who believes that such a thing is Orthodoxy has associated Orthodoxy exclusively with the future life. Such people do not do much in this life, but rather wait to die in order to go to Paradise, since in their lifetime they were Orthodox Christians!

Another portion of the Orthodox are active within the domain of the Church, being interested not in the next life, but primarily in the present life. In other words, what interests them is how Orthodoxy will help them to live well in this life.

Such Orthodox Christians pray to God, have Priests say prayers, bless Holy Water, read supplicatory Canons, and anoint them with Holy Oil, etc., so that God will help them to have a pleasant life, to avoid falling ill, to provide for their children, to secure a good dowry and a good husband for their daughters, to have their sons find nice girls with good dowries to marry, to have their work go well, and even to help them with their stocks or businesses, etc. So we see that these Christians do not differ significantly from the faithful of other religions, who also do pretty much the same things.

In other words, from the foregoing, one sees Orthodoxy as having these two points in common with all of the other faiths:

Firstly, it prepares the faithful for life after death so that they might go to Paradise, as each one imagines it; secondly, it ensures that Christians do not pass through sorrows, worries, disasters, illnesses, wars, etc., in this life—that is, God takes care of everything according to their needs or desires. Thus, for the second group of Christians, religion plays a major rôle in this life, and especially in everyday life.

Deep down, however, who, among all of the aforementioned Christians, is interested in whether God exists or not? Who is seeking Him? For such people, whether or not God exists is not an issue, since it would simply be better if God *did* exist, so that we can call upon Him and ask Him to satisfy our needs, that our jobs might go well, and that we might have some happiness in this life.

Thus, we see that man has a very strong proclivity to want God to exist and to believe that God exists, because it is a human need for God to exist, in order that He might secure for him all of the things we have mentioned. Well then, since it is a human need for God to exist, *ergo*, God exists!

If man had no need of a God and could self-sufficiently secure a livelihood for himself in this life in some other way, then no one knows how many people would believe in God. Such is frequently the case, even in Greece.

We see, then, how many people, though previously indifferent with regard to religion, become religious towards the end of their lives, perhaps after having been frightened by some event. For they can no longer live without calling upon some God to help them—that is, out of superstition. For these reasons, human nature helps man to become religious. This does not apply to Orthodox Christians alone; it applies to the faithful of all religions. Human nature is the same everywhere. Thus it is that man, after his fall—darkened as he is by nature, or, rather, contrary to nature—inclines towards superstition.

WE now face the question: Where does superstition end and true faith begin?

The Fathers have clear positions and teachings on this subject.

A person who follows (or rather believes that he follows) the teaching of Christ and simply goes to Church every Sunday, communes at regular intervals, and makes use of Priests for Blessings of the Waters, anointments, etc., without exploring these things in greater depth, abiding in the *letter of the law* and not the *spirit of the law*—does such a person benefit in any particular way from Orthodoxy?

Next, another person who prays exclusively for the next life, for himself and for others, while being totally indifferent to this life—does he, again, benefit in any particular way from Orthodoxy?

The first tendency is personified by a parish Priest and those gathered around him with the aforementioned spirit, while the latter tendency is personified by a monastery Elder (usually an Archimandrite), who is retired and waiting to die, with a few monks around him.

To the extent that these two tendencies are not centered around *purification* and *illumination*, from a Patristic viewpoint they are at fault as to the thing they are pursuing. On the other hand, to the extent that they are centered around *purification*, *illumination* and the implementation of the Orthodox Patristic ascetic regimen for the acquisition of *noetic prayer*, only then are things placed on a proper foundation.

These two tendencies incline towards opposite extremes. They do not have a *common axis*. The *common axis* that upholds Orthodoxy and holds it together, its one and only *axis*, on all of the questions that concern Orthodoxy, and which puts everything on a correct foundation, when taken into account, is the *axis*: *purification, illumination, deification*.

The Fathers are not **exclusively** interested in what will happen to a person after his death; what is of primary interest to them is

what a person will become in this life.

After death, there is no *treatment of the mind*, so the *treatment* must begin in this life; for “there is no repentance in Hades.” This is why Orthodox theology is not other-worldly, futurological, or eschatological, but is purely this-worldly. For the solicitude of Orthodoxy is for man in this world, in this life, not after death.

Now, why are *purification* and *illumination* necessary? So that a person will go to Paradise and escape going to Hell? Is that why we need them? What constitutes *purification* and *illumination* and why do the Orthodox seek after them?

In order for one to find the reason and give an answer to this question, he must have the basic *key* in his possession, which is: All people on earth share the **same end**, from an Orthodox theological viewpoint. Whether a person is Orthodox, Buddhist, Hindu, agnostic or atheist, or whatever he may be (that is, every person on earth), **he is destined to see the Glory of God**. He will see the Glory of God at the **common end** of mankind during the Second Coming of Christ. All people will see the Glory (Uncreated Light) of God, and from this viewpoint they have the **same end**.

Everyone, of course, will see the Glory of God, but with one difference: The saved will see the Glory of God as a most sweet and never-setting **Light**, whereas the damned will see the same Glory of God as a consuming **fire** that will burn them.

That we will all see the Glory of God is a true and expected fact. Beholding God—that is, His Glory, His Light—is something that will happen whether we want it or not. The experience of this Light, however, will be different from one person to another.

Thus, the task of the Church and the clergy is not to help us to see this Glory, because this will come to pass one way or another. The work of the Church is focused on *how* each person will see God, not on *whether* he will see God.

In other words, the task of the Church is to proclaim to people that there is a true God, that God is revealed as either **Light** or a consuming **fire**, and that all people will see God at the Second

Coming of Christ, and to prepare its members so that they might see God not as **fire**, but as **Light**.

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THIS preparation of the members of the Church, and also of all people who want to see God as Light, is essentially a *therapeutic treatment*, which must begin and end *in this life*. The *therapy* must take place and be completed *in this life*. For *after death, there is no repentance*.

This therapeutic treatment is the essence and primary content of Orthodox Tradition, as well as being the principal concern of the Orthodox Church.

It is composed of the following three stages of spiritual ascent: *Purification* from passions, *illumination* by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, and *deification*, again by the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

It is also the case that **if someone does not at least arrive at the state of partial illumination in this life, he is unable to see God as Light either in this life or in the next.**

It is, therefore, clear that the Fathers of the Church concern themselves with man as he is today, *at this moment*. And the one needing *treatment* is each person, who has the responsibility before God to begin this task today, *in this life*, because in this life he is able to do so; not after death. And this person himself will decide if he will follow this *therapeutic* path or not.

Christ said: "I am the way." The *Way* towards what? Not only towards the next life. Christ is primarily the *Way* in this life. Christ is the *Way* to His Father and to our Father. Christ is revealed to man first in this life, and He shows him the path to His Father. This path is Christ Himself.

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THE QUESTION, now, is: Is religion equated with a teaching concerning the immortality of the soul, and also with a teaching concerning the existence of God for the future life? Likewise, is it equated with the victory of full justice? That is, do we need religion because there must be a Just God, Who will pronounce the

final judgment on all people, so that the unjust might be punished in Hell and the just (*the good children*) be rewarded in Paradise?

If the answer is yes, well then, religion must exist, first of all so that justice might ultimately prevail and, secondly, so that man's desire for bliss will not remain unfulfilled. Is it possible, in other words, for the *good child* **not** to live a blissful life after death? It is not possible! And let us say he was wronged in this life. In other words, is it possible for all of these wronged people, that is, the *good children*, not to be vindicated in the future life? It is not possible! And should they not lead a pleasant existence there, a life of bliss? Of course! But for this to happen, there has to be life after death, as well as a good and just God, Who must make a good and just distribution! Is it not so? There has to be [such a God], according to the understanding of the Middle Ages, that is, of Western theology.

With regard to all of these things, however, modern psychology comes along and explodes everything.

It tells us that these perceptions are *psychological*; for man has inside him a sense of justice, which is what demands that the *bad children* be punished and the *good children* be rewarded! And since the rewarding fails to take place in this life, human imagination puts forth the idea that these things must be fulfilled in another life, for which reason a weak person, as well as one who loves justice and has profound and earnest feelings about justice, becomes religious and believes the doctrines of the religion that he follows.

In other words, he believes because the doctrine in which he believes serves his psychological need for justice to be rendered. This reason does not have philosophical—that is, metaphysical—foundations, but only *psychological foundations*.

What is correct, however, about the foregoing line of thought is that if justice and bliss will ever prevail for good people, they will have to prevail in this life. For such people do not know if they will have another life, since the arguments we mentioned for the existence of another life are purely *psychological arguments* and

not *scientific arguments*—that is, arguments founded on *experience* and the *scientific method*.

Thus, these people believe in a life after death simply because they want to believe. And this is why the essence of their religion is the existence of another life where injustice is punished and justice rewarded.

For these reasons, then, one sees that sober people today in Europe and America no longer accept these foundations of religion and have been led to agnosticism, while their counterparts in Eastern Europe have been led to atheism.

In recent years, however, one finds many Communists who have abandoned the harsh atheism of the past and have become agnostics. In this respect, they resemble the agnostics of Europe and America.

On the other side, there are churchgoers in Communist countries and America who continue to believe in life after death because, as we explained, they want to believe, without having scientific arguments to support their beliefs. This is the general situation.

Now, what is the Orthodox position on all of these issues?

2. The Metaphysical Conception of Religion

ORTHODOXY is first and foremost concerned with this life, here. The Fathers stress that “there is no repentance after death.” Modern Greek theologians, however, following their teacher, Adamantios Koraës, have a metaphysical understanding of the subject and have copied the methodology of the Roman Catholics and the Protestants in the matter of religion.

At the time when these people left to study theology in Europe and Russia, and also in America after the war, the great conflict had already begun years before between the *empiricists*, on the one hand, who are the heirs to the Enlightenment, of the French Revolution of 1789, and the metaphysicians, on the other hand.

The basic difference between *empiricists* and *metaphysicians* is

that the essence of the *empirical* approach is observation, while that of *metaphysics* is *philosophical speculation*.

At that time, all religious people were followers of metaphysics—and have been so even until recently—, whereas all empiricists were agnostics, and some of them atheists. Why? Because the essence of the empirical approach is not even philosophy. Certainly, it is presented as empirical philosophy, as the philosophy of empiricists. They prevailed over the metaphysicians in America and accomplished a great deed for Orthodoxy. They were, however, devastating for Modern Greek theology.

Nowadays, in Greece, all Marxists are empiricists, without being aware of it, of course. This is because Greek Marxist ideologists do not know what the family tree of Marxism is, as do their counterparts in Europe and America; for, here, they have merely learned their lessons mechanically, by rote, like the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I believe that it is a great tragedy—not an Aeschylean one, but a shameful one—that there are no powerful intellectual Marxists in Greece. Of course, this is fortunate for the police and right-wingers, as well as for Modern Greek theologians, but it is unfortunate for the search for truth. For Marxism started out on empirical bases and ended up where it has ended up.

The foundation of Marxism and the foundation of Patristic Theology, from a scientific point of view, are the same; thus, between the two of them, the Marxists and the Patristic theologians could have come to an understanding.

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MARXISM, however, clashed with religion....

Yes, but with what religion? Not with Revelation, but rather with the religion that is equated with metaphysics. And one of these metaphysicians who equated the lot of Hellenism with metaphysics was Adamantios Koraës.

The essential difference between empiricists and metaphysicians is that the primary hallmark of the metaphysician is his pro-

pensity to equate reality with something that seems to him to be logically certain. Of course, a man can have logical certainty about something by logical reasoning. But since this is not subject to empirical verification and empirical confirmation, how can he be certain about what he is thinking and logically concluding? Because it is a simple thought? But how can one equate his thought with certainty? The metaphysician does such a thing, whereas the empiricist accepts and classifies in groups only whatever comes under his notice by empirical observation.

Within these frameworks, Calvinists have some difficulty, along with the Papists. Lutherans, however, live in another world altogether, as far as these matters are concerned.

Now, as for the atheist, why does he not believe? Because he does not have the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of *inward faith*. As for those who say that they believe, are they really believers? Not all; for example, the Calvinists, who often say that they believe because they are *predestined* [to believe].

In this way, however, they tread an anti-scientific path; that is, one that is not supported by any empirical reality. Nor do they have any metaphysical support for what they believe. They are, of course, aware of this, because they are intellectuals and know how things are, but they continue to act in this way.

This is why it has been observed that both Calvinists and Lutherans take refuge in existentialism. The same thing occurs with American Protestants, who also add *emotionalism* to the foregoing. American Protestants are very emotional both in their worship and in their behavior.

3. Orthodoxy as the Official Religion of the Roman State

BEARING these things in mind now, we see why the Byzantine State sought to have Orthodoxy as its official religion and why it made so many efforts to preserve Orthodox doctrine intact.

Why did it do so? Simply to preserve doctrine as doctrine? Or perhaps because Orthodox doctrine in particular was a precondition for the cure of its citizens, which cure would occasion a social restoration to health through the healing of the personality of each and every citizen? More likely the latter.

What was the *national anthem* of the Byzantine Empire? Was it not “Save, O Lord, Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance; grant victories to the emperors over barbarians, and through Thy Cross preserve Thou Thy commonwealth”?

This *hymn* expresses the ideology—if we can call it that—of the implementation of Orthodox teaching, faith, and life within the State; that is, on a nationwide scale.

Since the State foresaw the contribution to society and the benefit that would result from the Orthodox *therapeutic teaching and method*, if it were implemented, it instituted and promoted the Orthodox Faith as the official State religion, such that the State would be filled with parishes in which Priests would practice this *therapeutic regimen*.

Thus, the parishes would grow with time into [communities of] healthy citizens, as would the State itself, by extension. The Church naturally did not refuse this, but rather worked in consort with the State.

It so happened, however, that this power given to the Church, together with the requisite ecclesiastical administrative organization, created a public service problem as a necessary evil. That is, many who coveted public positions pretended to be Orthodox, though they were not, and the Church began to be secularized.

Aside from all of these things, the Church had as its parallel task to protect the State from *quack doctors*, that is, from heretics. The local and Œcumenical Synods attended to precisely this.

In the Acts of the Œcumenical Synods, we find the phrase: “*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....*” Those present at the Synods said this because they possessed *noetic prayer*, by which they were inwardly informed concerning the truth of the Decrees that they formulated.

Today, on the other hand, when the practice of *noetic prayer* has grown rare among Bishops, if a Synod of Bishops were to come together and they were to stand up at the opening and all say together: “O Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things...” would the Holy Spirit illumine them without fail? That is, simply because they are canonical Bishops, assemble at a Synod, and say a prayer?

The Holy Spirit does not work this way—that is, under these conditions; others are needed. The one praying needs to have *noetic prayer* already working inside him, when he attends a Synod, for the Grace of God to illumine him. Those attending false synods did not have this prayerful state.

The Bishops of old, however, did have such spiritual experience, and when they would come together as a Body, they knew what the Holy Spirit was informing them in their hearts on a particular matter. And, when they issued resolutions, they knew that their resolutions were sound. For they were in a state of *illumination*, and certain of them had even reached *glorification*, that is, *deification*.

Thus, we see that in the ancient Church the charismatic element prevailed (that is, its members were governed by gifts of the Holy Spirit), and the institutional elements (that is, formal ecclesiastical and administrative qualifications) followed.

This is very clear in the New Testament, in the ancient Church, and in the great Fathers of the Œcumenical Synods, from the First Œcumenical Synod (fourth century) through the Ninth Œcumenical Synod, which took place under St. Gregory Palamas (fourteenth century).

This kind of testimony of the Holy Spirit within the *heart* is well known only to those who have *noetic prayer* working in their hearts.

Noetic prayer is an empirical verification and assurance that a person’s mind has been cured. Such a cure is feasible for all people, as long as the spiritual preconditions of the *therapeutic method are met*.

In other words, this method is not destined or designed only for certain monastics—that is, for certain people wearing *rasa*—but for all people. For nowhere in Holy Scripture does any distinction seem to be made between *monastic spirituality* and *lay spirituality*.

Holy Scripture speaks of only *one spirituality*. Have you ever found a passage in Holy Scripture that speaks separately about the spirituality of lay people and the spirituality of the clergy? There is no such thing in Holy Scripture. **Spirituality in Christ is the same for all of the faithful.**

This Christian spirituality is essentially a *therapeutic regimen*, which is offered by Christ to all people. It is designed for all people. It is not just for monastics, or the clergy, or the educated, or intellectuals, because there is no intellectualism whatsoever contained therein. Nor does it deal with the outer and visible aspects of man, but rather with the inner and hidden aspects.

Part II²

Religion is a Neuro-Biological Sickness, But Orthodoxy is Its Cure

The sickness of religion

THE PATRIARCHS and the Prophets of the Old Testament, the Apostles and Prophets of the New Testament, as well as their successors, are perfectly cognizant of the *sickness of religion* and of the Physician Who treats it; that is, the Lord (Yahweh) of Glory. He is the Physician of our souls and bodies. He cured this *sickness* in His friends and faithful ones before His Incarnation and continues, as God-Man, to cure it.

The *sickness* in question consists of a *short circuit* between the spirit in man's *heart* (that is, according to the Fathers, his *noetic energy*) and his brain.

In its normal state, *noetic energy* moves cyclically, like a crank, praying within the *heart*.

In its diseased state, *noetic energy* does not “crank” cyclically. Instead, unfurled and rooted in the *heart*, it gets stuck in the brain and causes a *short circuit* between the brain and the *heart*. Thus, the concepts of the brain, which all derive from the environment, become concepts of *noetic energy*, which is at all times rooted in the *heart*.

In this way, the sufferer becomes a slave of his surroundings. As such, he confuses certain concepts that come from his surroundings with his God or gods.

By the term *religion*, we mean every “equation” of the Uncreated with the created, and especially every “equation of representations” of the Uncreated with concepts and words of human thought, which is the basis for idol worship.

These concepts and words may be simple concepts and words, or they may also include representations with statues and images, within and without a putative Divinely-inspired text.

In other words, the equating of concepts of God and words of Holy Scripture with the Uncreated also belongs to the world of idolatry, and is the foundation of all heresies to date.

In the **Therapeutic Tradition** of the Old and New Testament, appropriate concepts and words are used as means during the *purification* and *illumination* of our hearts; these are dispensed with during *glorification*, when the indescribable, incomprehensible, and uncreated Glory of God, which fills all created things, is revealed in the Body of Christ.

Following *glorification*, the concepts and words of noetic prayer in the heart return. From his *glorification*, the person ascertains that there is no similitude between the created and the Uncreated, and that it is *impossible to express God and even more impossible to comprehend Him*.

The foundation of the heresies of the Vatican and of the Protestants is that they follow [St.] Augustine, who took the revealed Glory of God in the Old and New Testament for something that is “created,” which comes and goes, at that.

Not only that, but, what is worse, he also took, among other

things, the Angel of Great Counsel and His Glory for creations *that have a beginning and an end*, which God brought from nothing into existence, so as to be seen and heard, and which will return again to non-existence when their missions have been accomplished.

But for a person to have correct direction in the *treatment of noetic energy*, he must have as his guide the experience of one who has been deified, who testifies to certain *axioms*: that between the Uncreated God and His Uncreated Energies, on the one hand, and His creation, on the other hand, there is no similitude, and that “it is impossible to express God and even more impossible to comprehend Him.” (St. Gregory the Theologian).

Only on the basis of these *tenets* can one escape the plight of acquiring the Devil as a guide, by means of self-styled theologians who speculate about God and Divine things.

In its natural state, *noetic energy* regulates the passions—that is, of hunger, thirst, sleep, the instinct of self-preservation (i.e., the fear of death)—so that they are irreproachable.

In an unhealthy state of *noetic energy*, the passions become reprehensible. These, in combination with an unbridled *imagination*, create a magical religion for the bridling of the elements of nature or for the additional salvation of the soul from matter in a state of happiness and bliss of body and soul.

Faith, according to Holy Scripture, is coöperation with the Holy Spirit, Who initiates the *treatment* of the sickness of selfish love in the heart and its transformation into love that “seeketh not its own.”

This *treatment* culminates in *glorification (deification)* and constitutes the quintessence of the Orthodox Catholic Church, which thereby replaced idolatry as the nucleus of the Hellenic civilization of the Roman Empire.

We ought to have a clear picture of the context within which both Church and State saw the contribution of those who have been deified to the *cure* of the *sickness of religion*—which destroys human personality through the quest for bliss here and beyond

the grave—in order to understand the reason why the Roman Empire incorporated the Orthodox Church into its code of law.

Neither the Church nor the State saw the Church's mission as a mere *remission of the sins* of the faithful for their entry into Paradise after death. This would be equivalent to doctors forgiving sick people for being ill so that they might be cured after death.

Both Church and State knew well that *remission of sins* was only the beginning of the treatment of the sickness of humankind: the pursuit of happiness.

This *treatment* began with *purification of the heart*, and arrived at the restoration of the *heart* to its natural state of *illumination*; and the entire person was brought to perfection in the preternatural state of *glorification*; that is, *deification*.

The result of this *treatment* and perfection was not only suitable preparation for life after bodily death, but also the transformation of society, *here and now*, from a group of egotistical and egocentric individuals into a community of people with selfless love, “which seeketh not its own.”



(*) **Protopresbyter John Romanides** (†), “Orthodoxy and Religion,” in *Ὁρθόδοξος Τύπος*, No. 1618 (November 11, 2005), pp. 3, 4; No. 1619 (November 18, 2005), pp. 3, 4. Publication layout ours.

1. Excerpts from the book by Father John Romanides, *Πατερική Θεολογία* [*Patristic Theology*] (university lectures from the academic year 1983) (Thessalonica: Ekdosis “Parakatatheke” 2004).

2. Excerpts from the volume *Ὁρθοδοξία-Ἑλληνισμός: πορεία στην γ' χιλιετία* [*Orthodoxy and Hellenism: Journey Towards the Third Millennium*] (Holy Mountain: Ekdosis Hieras Mones Koutloumousiou, 1996), Vol. II, pp. 67-68.