

The Illness of religion Rev. Metropolitan of Nafpaktos and Saint Vlasios Hierotheos

The greatest problem of Western Christianity - and of many Orthodox also – is that they have ‘religionized’ Christianity and have turned the Church into a religion. In this way, they cultivated fundamentalisms, hatreds, divisions, a magical perception and relationship with God, also a competitive disposition of one towards another, a self-centered view of life, a utilitarian and self-benefiting perception of society, an imaginary interpretation of everything, the sentimental approach to living and generally the opinion that the others comprise –and are- a threat to our existence.

Thus, in these circumstances, the brightly-lit Christmas trees, the sentimental melodies, the moral-building analyses, all criminally conceal existential nakedness and make man a tragic being.

The feast of the Birth of Christ cannot be confined to a few sentimental situations: a festive décor, an intellectual, rationalistic interpretation of events, a moralistic framework; it has a very profound meaning and existential significance. If one remains at an external level, then he is leaving himself hungry and thirsty, deprived of a life meaning and existential freedom.

The incarnation of Christ was considered and was celebrated by the Fathers of the Church and the worshipping ecclesiastic community as the abolishing of religion and its transformation into a Church. In fact, the memorable father John Romanides had said in the most categorical way that Christ became human, in order to free us of the illness of religion.

The word ‘religion’ is mentioned in Homer’s epics; it is also used by Herodotus to express the worship and the honor that a person has to offer God. Etymologically, the (Greek) word for ‘religion’ is derived from the ancient word that implies ‘ascend’, and therefore, with the term ‘religion’, the ascent of man towards God is implied. But even the (Greek) word for “human” is etymologically derived from the expression “upwards looking”, again implying an ascent.

But, it appears at a first glance, that an ascent presupposes the acceptance of the essence of metaphysics, according to which, a person’s soul that has fallen from the immortal and impersonal world of ideas and is encased in a body, has to rid itself of the body-sign-tomb and return to the world of ideas. But even the Latin word *religio* – which is used to denote the word religion – signifies, according to dictionaries, the bond-unity-union of man with God; it also denotes the same fact, i.e., the essence and the content of metaphysics. In fact, it also presupposes – if we seek it in eastern religions – a faceless expression of mankind, since man has to disappear like a drop of water in the ocean of the Supreme Being, and thus eliminating the persona.

As the late Father John Romanides had taught, the term ‘religion’ implies the relating of the uncreated to the created, and actually the relating of the representations of the uncreated with the notions and the words of human thought, and this kind of relating is of course the foundation of the religion and the worship of idols. Therefore, in this case, the face of God is lost, and so is the person’s face; man becomes gravely ill, since his vices and his imagination are cultivated even more, and more than this, we can say that the so-called irreproachable-natural vices (hunger, thirst, etc.) become reproachable vices; causes of social anomalies because of unlimited ambition, unjust craving for acquisition and unleashed debauchery.

It is well-known that Feuerbach at first, then Marx, had said that “religion was the opium of the people”. We can accept this viewpoint, that religion – as we see it in the East and in the

religionized views of western Christianity – is the opium of the people, since it benumbs the people, it mortifies societies and leads them to such a degree of deactivation, that it becomes exploitable material for the institution of a tyranny that deprives mankind of his unalienable right to freedom.

I would like to submit two characteristic examples of religious expression herebelow.

The first example comes from the Buddhist religion. We know that according to Buddhism, that which preoccupies mankind is the problem of the pain that originates from the desire to live. Hence, the ultimate goal of the “enlightened” one is the discarding of this passion to live. The mortifying of the desire for life is achieved through a special method called Yoga with its different variations, such as Hatha Yoga (uniting with the Brahma through physical exercises), Karma Yoga (uniting with the Brahma through deeds and ritual acts), Mantra Yoga (uniting with the Brahma through chants and magic syllables), Bhakti Yoga (uniting with the Brahma through the absolute worship of one deity or the Guru himself), Jnana Yoga (uniting with the Brahma through mystical knowledge), Kundalini Yoga (uniting with the Brahma through demonic activities), Tantra Yoga (uniting with the Brahma through unbridled sexual acts). With these methods, man is supposed to attain absolute Nirvana, which is the extinguishing of his existence and the riddance of one’ desire for life, the ultimate purpose being the avoidance of Samsara – the recycling of life, or, reincarnation. Thus, the personal Atman is united to the overall Brahma, just like a drop entering the ocean.

It is obvious that in a religious life such as this, there is no personality; man is merely considered a unit, as there is also no such thing as society; no social life is encouraged, since every lifetime is considered a beginning of grief.

The second example originates from the theories of Anselm of Canterbury, a scholastic theologian, who founded a Christian system that prevailed in the West, having in mind the feudal system of organizing society. But the feudal lord had absolute value and honor that could not be violated, because every violation of his honor and every disturbance of the feudal system that was considered a work of God, entailed the punishment of the violator; thus God is the highest form of justice, He has honor, and has instituted order within creation, therefore, the violator must either satisfy God’s sense of justice or be punished. Thus, Anselm interpreted the crucifixional sacrifice of Christ, not as an expression of love for mankind, but as the atonement of justice by God the Father. This system, with the assistance of the absolute destination, led to enormous problems in the western world; problems both personal and social, as analyzed by Max Weber in his book “Protestant morality and the spirit of capitalism”.

These two examples, one from the east and the other from the west, indicate how Feuerbach arrived at his motto “religion is the opium of the people”. Naturally, we Orthodox also believe that if we give religion this definition, the metaphysical definition, then it can indeed become the opium of the people, because it will destroy every personal life, eliminate personal freedom, and even disintegrate social life, and turn man from a person into a unit.

Christianity however appeared in the history of mankind as the end of religion, and the experience of the Church. The term “Church” is an ancient Greek term and indicates a community, the congregation of the populace – the municipality – that would solve its problems. Naturally, with the term ‘Church’ we do not imply something external; we are implying the personal communion of mankind with God and its fellow-man, as seen in the Prophets of the Old Testament, in the Apostles of the New Testament, I the Acts of the Apostles, where “all those who believed were of one mind, and had everything common to all; they sold the lands and the belongings and shared them amongst everyone, for if they had needs..... (Acts,2:44-45); We see

it in the communes of monks, in the teaching of the major Fathers of the Church and it extends into our time, as seen in the ecclesiastic communities narrated by Papadiamantis and the Memoirs of Makriyannis. And we know full well, from various studies, that both Papadiamantis and Makriyannis were not religious people; they were ecclesiastic, not inspired by western Puritanism, but by the eschastic-nyptic Orthodox tradition.

The greatest problem of western Christianity, and many Orthodox, is that – according to Ch. Yannaras – they have religionized Christianity, and transformed the Church into a religion. In this way, they cultivated fundamentalisms, hatreds, divisions, a magical perception and relationship with God, also a competitive disposition of one towards another, a self-centered view of life, a utilitarian and self-benefiting perception of society, an imaginary interpretation of everything, the sentimental approach to living and generally the opinion that the others comprise –and are- a threat to our existence.

Thus, in these circumstances, the brightly-lit Christmas trees, the sentimental melodies, the moral-building analyses, all criminally conceal existential nakedness and make man a tragic being.

If contemporary, speculating people looked for a meaning behind the Birth of Christ, it would be that with His Birth, Christ abolished the illness of religion and transformed into a living Church – with whatever its authentic meaning entails. This is the need of contemporary man who is suffering from the tragic trinity as Victor Frankl would have said, that is: suffering, guilt and death, inasmuch as he feels his life is a pre-death experience, an existential and eternal death, and not only seeks the experience of pleasure, but perhaps through pleasure, is seeking the survival of existence.

Orthodoxy as therapy

By Protopresbyter George Metallinos

Dean of the Athens University School

If we wished to conventionally define Christianity, as Orthodoxy, we would say it is the experiencing of the presence of the Uncreated (=of God) throughout history, and the potential of creation (=mankind) becoming God “by Grace”. Given the perpetual presence of God in Christ, in historical reality, Christianity offers mankind the possibility of theosis, just as Medical Science offers mankind the possibility of preserving or restoring his health through a specific therapeutic procedure and a specific way of life.

The writer is in a position to appreciate the coincidence between the medical and ecclesiastic poemantic sciences, because, as a diabetic and a Christian, he is aware that in both cases, he has to faithfully abide by the rules that have been set out, in order to attain both these two goals.

The unique and absolute goal of life in Christ is theosis, in other words, our union with God, so that man - through his participation in God's uncreated energy – may become “by the Grace of God” that which God is by nature (=without beginning and without end). This is what “salvation” means, in Christianity. It is not the moral improvement of man, but a re-creation, a re-construction in Christ, of man and of society, through an existing and an existential relationship with Christ, Who is the incarnate manifestation of God in History. This is what the Apostle Paul's words imply, in Corinthians II 5:17 : “If someone is in Christ, he is a new creation”. Whoever is united with Christ is a new creation.

That is why – Christianically – the incarnation of God-Logos - this redemptory “intrusion” of the

Eternal and the Beyond-time God into Historical time – represents the commencement of a new world, of a (literally) “New Age”, which continues throughout the passing centuries, in the persons of authentic Christians: the Saints. The Church exists in this world, both as the “body of Christ” as well as “in Christ”, in order to offer salvation, through one’s embodiment in this regenerative procedure. This redemptory task of the Church is fulfilled by means of a specific therapeutic method, whereby throughout history, the Church essentially acts as a universal Infirmary. “Spiritual Infirmary” (spiritual hospital) is the characterization given to the Church by the blessed Chrysostom (†407).

Further along, we shall examine the answers given to the following questions:

What is the sickness that Christian Orthodoxy cures?

What is the therapeutic method it implements?

What is the identity of authentic Christianity, which radically separates it from all of its heretic deviations, and from every other form of religion?

1. The sickness of human nature is the fallen state of mankind, along with all of creation, which likewise suffers (“sighs and groans together” – Romans 8:22) together with mankind. This diagnosis applies to every single person (regardless whether they are Christian or not, or whether they believe or not), on account of the overall unity of mankind (ref. Acts 17:26). Christian Orthodoxy does not confine itself within the narrow boundaries of one religion - which cares only for its own followers – but, just like God, “wants all people to be saved and to arrive at the realization of the truth” (Timothy I, 2:4), since God is “the Saviour of all persons” (Timothy I, 4:10). Thus, the sickness that Christianity refers to pertains to all of mankind; Romans 5:12: “death has come upon all people, since all of them have sinned (=they have veered from their path towards theosis). Just as the fall (i.e. sickness) is a panhuman issue, so is salvation-therapy directly dependent on the inner functions of each person.

The natural (authentic) state of a person is (patristically) defined by the functioning inside him of three mnemonic systems; two of which are familiar and monitored by medical science, while the third is something handled by poematic therapeutics. The first system is cellular memory (DNA), which determines everything inside a human organism. The second is the cerebral cellular memory, brain function, which regulates our association with our self and our environment. Both these systems are familiar to medical science, whose work it is to maintain their harmonious operation.

The experience of the Saints is familiar with one other mnemonic system: that of the heart, or ‘noetic’ memory, which functions inside the heart. In Orthodox tradition, the heart does not only have a natural operation, as a mere pump that circulates the blood. Furthermore, according to patristic teaching, neither the brain nor the central nervous system is the center of our self-awareness; again, it is the heart, because, beyond its natural function, it also has a supernatural function. Under certain circumstances, it becomes the place of our communion with God, or, His uncreated energy. This is of course perceived through the experience of the Saints, and not through any logical function or through an intellectual theologizing.

Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (†1809), in recapitulating the overall patristic tradition in his work “Hortative Manual”, calls the heart a natural and supernatural center, but also a paranormal center, whenever its supernatural faculty becomes idle on account of the heart being dominated by passions. The heart’s supernatural faculty is the ultimate prerequisite for perfection, for man’s fulfillment, in other words, his theosis, for a complete embodiment in the communion in

Christ.

In its supernatural faculty, the heart becomes the space where the mind can be activated. In the Orthodox terminology codex, the mind (ΝΟΥΣ - appearing in the New Testament as 'the spirit of man' and 'the eye of the soul') is an energy of the soul, by means of which man can know God, and can reach the state of 'seeing' God. We must of course clarify that 'knowledge' of God does not imply knowledge of His incomprehensible and inapproachable divine essence. This distinction between 'essence' and 'energy' in God is the crucial difference between Orthodoxy and all other versions of Christianity. The energy of the mind inside the heart is called the 'noetic faculty' of the heart. We again stress that according to Orthodoxy, the Mind (ΝΟΥΣ) and Logic (ΛΟΓΙΚΗ) are not the same thing, because logic functions within the brain, whereas the mind functions within the heart.

The noetic faculty is manifested as the "incessant prayer" (ref. Thessalonians I, 5:17) of the Holy Spirit inside the heart (ref. Galatians 4:6, Romans 8:26, Thessalonians I 5:19) and is named by our Holy Fathers as "the memory of God". When man has in his heart the "memory of God", in other words, when he hears in his heart "the voice" (Corinthians I 14:2, Galatians 4:6, etc.), he can sense God "dwelling" inside him (Romans 8:11). Saint Basil the Great in his 2nd epistle says that the memory of God remains incessant when it is not interrupted by mundane cares, and the mind "departs" towards God; in other words, when it is in communion with God. But this does not mean that the faithful who has been activated by this divine energy withdraws from the needs of everyday life, by remaining motionless or in some kind of ecstasy; it means that his Mind is liberated from these cares, which are items that preoccupy only his Logic. To use an example that we can relate to: A scientist, who has re-acquired his noetic faculty, will use his logic to tackle his problems, while his mind inside his heart will preserve the memory of God incessantly. The person who preserves all three mnemonic systems is the Saint. To Orthodoxy, he is a healthy (normal) person. This is why Orthodoxy's therapy is linked to man's course towards holiness.

The non-function or the below-par function of man's noetic faculty is the essence of his fall. The much-debated "ancestral sin" was precisely man's mishandling –from that very early moment of his historical presence- of the preservation of God's memory (=his communion with God) inside his heart. This is the morbid state that all of the ancestral descendants participate in; because it was no moral or personal sin, but a sickness of man's nature ("Our nature has become ill, of this sin", observes Saint Cyril of Alexandria - †444), which is transmitted from person to person, exactly like the sickness that a tree transmits to all the other trees that originate from it.

The inactivating of the noetic faculty or the memory of God, and confusing it with the function of the brain (which happens to all of us), subjugates man to stress and to the environment, and to the quest for bliss through individualism and an anti-social stance. While ill because of his fallen state, man uses God and his fellow man to secure his personal security and happiness. Personal use of God is found in "religion" (=the attempt to elicit strength from the divine), which can degenerate into a self-deification of man ("I became a self-idol" says Saint Andrew of Crete, in his 'Major Canon'). The use of fellow-man -and subsequently creation in general- is achieved by exploiting them in every possible way. This, therefore, is the sickness that man seeks to cure, by becoming fully incorporated in the "spiritual hospital" of the Church.

2. The purpose of the Church's presence in the world –as a communion in Christ- is man's cure; the restoration of his heart-centred communion with God; in other words, of his noetic faculty. According to the professor fr. John Romanides, "the patristic tradition is neither a social philosophy, nor a system of morals, or a religious dogmatism; it is a therapeutic method. In this context, it is very similar to Medicine and especially Psychiatry. The noetic energy of the soul that prays mentally and incessantly inside the heart is a natural 'instrument', which everyone possesses

and is in need of therapy. Neither philosophy, nor any of the known positive or social sciences can cure this 'instrument'. This is why the incurable cases are not even aware of this instrument's existence."

The need for man to be cured is a panhuman issue, related firstly to the restoration of every person to his natural state of existence, through the reactivation of the third mnemonic faculty. However, it also extends to man's social presence. In order for man to be in communion with his fellow man as a brother, his self-interest (which in the long run acts as self-love) must be transformed into selflessness (ref. Corinthians I, 13:8) "love....does not ask for reciprocation.."). Selfless love exists: it is the love of the Triadic God (Romans 5:8, John I 4:7), which gives everything without seeking anything in exchange. That is why Christian Orthodoxy's social ideal is not "common possessions", but the "lack of possessions", as a willed resignation from any sort of demand. Only then can justice be possible.

The therapeutic method that is offered by the Church is the spiritual life; the life in the Holy Spirit. Spiritual life is experienced as an exercise (Ascesis) and a participation in the Uncreated Grace, through the Sacraments. Ascesis is the violation of our self-ruled and inanimate through sin nature, which is coursing headlong into a spiritual or eternal death, i.e. the eternal separation from the Grace of God. Ascesis aspires to victory over our passions, with the intention of conquering the inner subservience to those pestiferous focal points of man and participating in Christ's Cross and His Resurrection.

The Christian, who is practicing such restraint under the guidance of his Therapist-Spiritual Father, becomes receptive to Grace, which he receives through his participation in the sacramental life of the ecclesiastic corpus. There cannot be any un-exercising Christian, just as there cannot be a cured person who does not follow the therapeutic advice that the doctor prescribed for him.

3. The above lead us to certain constants, which verify the identity of Christian Orthodoxy:

(a) The Church –as the body of Christ- functions as a therapy Centre-hospital. Otherwise, it would not be a Church, but a "Religion". The Clergy are initially selected by the cured, in order to function as therapists. The therapeutic function of the Church is preserved today, mostly in Monasteries which, having survived secularism, continue the Church of the Apostolic times.

(b) The scientists of ecclesiastic therapy are the already cured persons. Those who have not had the experience of therapy cannot be therapists. That is the essential difference between the poemantic therapeutic science and medical science. The scientists of ecclesiastic therapy (Fathers and Mothers) bring forth other Therapists, just as the Professors of Medicine bring forth their successors.

(c) The Church's confining itself to a simple forgiveness of sins so that a place in paradise may be secured constitutes alienation and is tantamount to medical science forgiving the patient, so that he might be healed after death! The Church cannot send someone to Paradise or to Hell. Besides, Paradise and Hell are not places, they are ways of existence. By healing mankind, the Church prepares the person so that he might eternally look upon Christ in His uncreated light as a view of Paradise, and not as a view of Hell, or as "an all-consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). And this of course concerns every single person, because ALL people shall look eternally upon Christ, as "the Judge" of the whole world.

(d) The validity of science is verified by the achievement of its goals (i.e., in Medicine, it is the curing of the patient). It is the way that authentic scientific medicine is distinguished from charlatanry. The criterion of poemantic therapy by the Church is also the achievement of spiritual healing, by opening the way towards theosis. Therapy is not transferred to the afterlife; it takes

place during man's lifetime, here, in this world (*hinc et nunc*). This can be seen in the undeteriorated relics of the Saints that have overcome biological deterioration, such as the relics of the Eptanisos Saints: Spiridon, Gerasimos, Dionysios and Theodora Augusta. Undeteriorated relics are, in our tradition, the indisputable evidence of theosis, or in other words the fulfilment of the Church's ascetic therapy.

I would like to ask the Medical scientists of our country to pay special attention to the issue of the non-deterioration of holy relics, given that they haven't been scientifically interfered with, but, in them is manifest the energy of Divine Grace; because it has been observed that, at the moment when the cellular system should begin to disintegrate, it automatically ceases to, and instead of emanating any malodour of decay, the body emanates a distinctive fragrance. I limit this comment to the medical symptoms, and will not venture into the aspect of miraculous phenomena as evidence of theosis, because that aspect belongs to another sphere of discussion.

(e) Lastly, the divine texts of the Church (Holy Bible, Synodic and Patristic texts) do not constitute coding systems of any Christian ideology; they bear a therapeutic character and function in the same way that university dissertations function in medical science. The same applies to the liturgical texts, as for example the Benedictions. The simple reading of a Benediction (prayer), without the combined effort of the faithful in the therapeutic procedure of the Church, would be no different to the instance where a patient resorts to the doctor for his excruciating pains, and, instead of an immediate intervention by the doctor, he is limited to being placed on an operating table, and being read the chapter that pertains to his specific ailment.

This, in a nutshell, is Orthodoxy. It doesn't matter whether one accepts it or not. However, with regard to scientists, I have tried -as a colleague in science myself- to scientifically respond to the question: "What is Orthodoxy".

Any other version of Christianity constitutes a counterfeiting and a perversion of it, even if it aspires to presenting itself as something Orthodox.

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Notes – Clarifications

1. The Uncreated = Something that has not been manufactured. This applies only to the Triadic God. The Created = Creation in general, with man at its apex. God is not a "universal" power, as designated by New Age terminology ("everything is one, everyone is God!"), because, as the Creator of all, He transcends the entire universe, given that in essence He is "Something" entirely different (*Das ganz Andere*). There is no analogous association between the created and the Uncreated. That is why the Uncreated makes Himself know, through His self-revelation. 2. A significant Christian text of the 2nd century, "The Poemen (Shepherd) of Hermas", says that in order for us to become members of the Body of Christ, we must be "squared" stones (=suitable for building) and not rounded ones!

3. According to fr. John Romanides, to whom we essentially owe the return to the “Philokalian” (=therapeutic-ascetic) view of our Faith, and in fact at an academic level; “Religion” implies every kind of “associating” of the uncreated and the created, as is done in idolatry. The “religious” person projects his “predudices” (=thoughts, meanings) into the divine realm, thus “manufacturing” his own God (this can also occur in the non-Patristic facet of “Orthodoxy”). The aim is “atonement”, “placation” of the “divine” and finally, the “utilizing” of God to one’s own advantage (the magic formula: do ut des). In our tradition however, our God does not need to be “placated”, because “He first loved us” (John I’ 4:19) Our God acts as “Love” (John I, 4:16) and selfless love at that. He gives us everything, and never asks for anything in return from His creations. This is why selflessness is the essence of Christian love, which goes far beyond the notion of a transaction.

4. This is expressed by the familiar and oft-repeated liturgical chant: “Ourselves and each other, and our entire life, let us appose unto Christ our Lord”.

Proper incorporation is normally found in Monasteries, wherever they function in the orthodox tradition of course. That is why Monasteries (for example those of the Holy Mountain) continue to be the model “parishes” of this “world”.

<http://www.imerovigli.org/info.php?catid=34>