

ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

By

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Most all of us have heard people, especially the youth of today, say, “I am spiritual and not religious.” Whatever that phrase may mean to each person regardless, it is as if the two are diametrical opposition. One cannot be true without the other being false.

This leads one to ask the question, what is spirituality? For our purposes presented in this article, what is Orthodox spirituality? In the brief space allotted here, I will attempt to summarize what Orthodox spirituality is and what it is not.

When one considers the topic of Orthodox spirituality, it is a great challenge to establish what exactly is meant by the term spirituality. As opposed to the Western Christian tradition which for a variety of reasons beginning with Thomas Aquinas has relied on the notion of a rational, systematized, Scholastic approach to the field of theology, Eastern Christianity takes a different approach to its theology.

The Eastern Christian view of spirituality is one that is not dichotomized into the sacred and the secular. It is one where the worldview is synthesized into a singular worldview which is expressed in the life in Christ. Thus, the starting points of reference between East and West are divergent and significant in this respect. That is why you do not see courses or professorships in Orthodox seminaries referred to as “systematic theology.” For the Orthodox, it is all dogmatic theology through Divine revelation.

In Orthodox spirituality, the starting point is the stated point which expresses the purpose of seeking to strive to live a life which seeks to have ultimate union with God in this plane of consciousness and in the life to come. As a result, the Christian is called to live this type of lifestyle in every thought, word, and deed. It is in the “doing” of the Christian life that spirituality is defined and exhibited.

As the recently sainted theologian Dimitru Staniloae would teach, “the absolute essentials of the Christian Faith are the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation.” It is on this basis of teaching of the Triune Godhead and the coming of the Logos, the God-Man, in the flesh that all Orthodox spirituality is based. It is the three distinct Persons of the One Godhead unconfused and undivided of which the Second Person becomes one of His creation.

Without the Christian Faith being rooted in these truths, any type of authentic spirituality is not only meaningless, but non-existent.

It is in realization of the reality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that a human being can truly be fulfilled in what he or she is truly called to be. As the seventh century St. Maximos the Confessor

would write, “Man is called to become by divine grace all that God Himself is by nature.” This is the whole purpose of our lives as human beings by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Spirituality becomes a vehicle for spiritual transformation that is Christ-centered. As the Apostle Paul teaches that the Christian life is one which is transformed by the renewing of one’s mind and by being “in Christ.”

St. Seraphim of Sarov would further simplify this notion of spirituality when he would write that, “the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God” encapsulates the purpose of our lives here on earth. Anything which falls short of this is a missing of the mark failure. Orthodox Christianity teaches that it is in this striving of ascetical endeavor that leads to the sanctification of the believer through prayer, fasting, self-denial, and the Divine Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church.

At this juncture, it must be stated how the Orthodox Tradition views the believer’s place in the collective body of the fellowship of believers which is known as the *ekklesia* (“those who have been called out” i.e. the Church). The Church is seen as the repository of the deposit of Faith Tradition which by the power of the Holy Spirit has produced the Holy Scriptures and the means necessary for salvation and theosis (sanctification). The primary Mysteries of the Church are: baptism, chrismation/confirmation, and the Holy Eucharist.

Baptism is our death, burial, and rebirth into Christ through the laver of regeneration by water and the Spirit. Chrismation is our personal Pentecost through the laying of hands with the anointing of chrism oil. The Eucharist is our partaking of the sacred Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the form of bread and wine which reflects the Resurrection of Christ and the life in the Kingdom of God in the *eschaton* (the world to come).

There are several other Mysteries delineated by the Church such as unction (anointing with holy oil), confession of sins, marriage, and ordination to ministry. All of these Mysteries each also can play a role in the Orthodox spiritual life for those who are recipients. It is interesting to note that the Orthodox Churches have never officially articulated the number seven for the sacraments. This was commonly adopted in the later Middle Ages in the East primarily because of Scholastic Thomastic influence from interactions with the Western Church. For example, different Eastern Church Fathers would have variant numbers of sacraments which would include: Christian burial, blessing of holy water, monastic tonsure, etc.

From the ancestral sin in the Garden of Eden by our fallen primordial parents Adam and Eve, to the birth, death, resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ who is the New Adam who has opened the doors of Paradise to us by the Cross and the empty Tomb, and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Christian has been equipped with the tools necessary for salvation.

God Himself has called His people to salvation and to a life of sanctity to live in communion with Him. As a modern era saint St. Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia wrote, “One can become a saint anywhere. At your work, whatever it may be. You can become holy through meekness, patience,

and love. Every day, make a new beginning, a new disposition, with enthusiasm, love, prayer, and silence.”

In the *Philokalia*, the Fathers tell us that true “hesychia” (peaceful silence) is attained by practicing 1.) catharsis (purification) the purging of evil thoughts, lusts, passions, and ambitions; 2.) illumination which is the filling of our minds and senses by holy things, thoughts, and images; and 3.) striving for perfection which produces total union with God. In short, what is taught in Orthodox spirituality is that the Christian participates with Divine Grace in a synergy of salvation and sanctification. All the while, the person is acknowledging the unknowability of the Divine essence of the Godhead. St. Gregory Palamas details the distinction of essences and energies in this union of the believer with the Triune Godhead when he speaks of union with Christ.

It is with this notion of the essences and energies of God that we can participate in the life of the Holy Trinity. It is precisely the Mysteries of Christ that provides us with the Christological vision of the Savior. It is the stavrotheologia (theology of the Cross) which provides us with the message of the Gospel of salvation. It is the Resurrection which fulfills us by defeating death once and for all.

St. Symeon the New Theologian writes of the need for the indwelling of the Light of the Holy Spirit through personal ascetical experience. The Russian theologian of the twentieth century Vladimir Lossky would reflect in his book *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, “These divine rays penetrate the whole created universe and are the cause of existence.”

A word must be said about the art, architecture, and worship of the Orthodox Churches in order to adequately summarize Orthodox spirituality. From the time, one steps forth into an Orthodox church, one is accosted in all sensory levels: sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste. The very architecture is meant to evoke the reverence of God and His Kingdom. The icons feature prominently in Orthodox spiritual life. Not only as teaching images, but as objects of veneration. The set prayers, hymns, and even the worship rite itself is considered to be conveyors of dogmatic teaching. As Sergius Bulgakov would observe, “The heart of Orthodoxy lies in its rites.” When a young convert asked, the eminent theologian Fr. Georges Florovsky what was the best way to learn Orthodox theology, he replied, “Go and stand at the chanter’s stand for a year. The Church’s teachings are in Her prayers and hymns.”

Florovsky, however, offers this caution:

Yet it is not enough to keep a “Byzantine Liturgy,” to restore a “Byzantine style” in iconography and Church architecture, to practice Byzantine modes of prayer and self-discipline. One has to go back to the very roots of this traditional “piety” which has been always cherished as a holy inheritance. One has to recover the patristic mind. Otherwise one will be still in danger of being internally split-between the “traditional” pattern of “piety” and the un-traditional pattern of mind. As “worshippers,” the Orthodox have always

stayed in the "tradition of the Fathers." They must stand in the same tradition also as "theologians." In no other way can the integrity of Orthodox existence be retained and secured.

What this should illustrate to us is the subtleties of spirituality. In its truest form, it is not contrived or mechanical. Rather, it is organic and spontaneous. In this brief examination, we have touched on the highlights of the theology and praxis of Orthodox spirituality. It is this author's hope that this has given the reader a better understanding and encouraged a further exploration of the life in Christ as expressed by the Fathers. With this, I close with the words of St. Makarios who said, "I have not yet seen a perfect Christian man, one completely free. Although one is at rest in grace and enters into the sweetness of grace, still sin is yet present within me." These words should encourage us all.

Dr. John G. Panagiotou is a theologian, scholar, and professor. He has authored the best-selling books *The Path to Oikonomia with Jesus Christ as Our Lighthouse* and *Workbook Companion to The Path to Oikonomia with Jesus Christ as Our Lighthouse*. Dr. Panagiotou serves as the Chairman of the OCP Society.