

UNIT 1A: ORTHODOX FAITH AND LIFE

1: Orthodox Faith and Life: The Unity of Theology and Experience

Understanding the Relationship between Prayer and Theology

You have chosen to start an exciting new course in theology—a course that is being made available through distance learning but is very personal, aiming to strengthen your personal understanding of God and how He works in your life, the life of others and creation. Unfortunately, “theology” is a word that at times makes some people uncomfortable, especially in the west where the study of theology has, sadly, often become the exclusive right of the specialist, a purely academic pursuit. Such academically oriented theology is frequently associated with abstraction and a lack of usefulness to Christian faith and life. If this were the true nature of theology then it would deserve to be rejected as a worthwhile Christian endeavour. Happily, this is not the case with theology in the Orthodox Church. The often quoted remark of the 4th century ascetic, Evagrius of Pontus, is certainly relevant: *“If you are a [sound] theologian, you will truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a [sound] theologian”* (*Treatise on Prayer*, 61). An alternative translation with a deeper meaning is: “The one who has purity in prayer is a true theologian; and the one who is a true theologian has purity in prayer.”

Despite the attractive model set out by Evagrius, the appropriate relationship between theology and prayer is not self-evident. “Theology” from the two Greek words “Theos” and “Logos” means “words about God.” Thus “prayer” is not merely saying the words of theology or else every lecture hall would be an oratory, that is, a place set aside for private prayer. Prayer is an act or state of communion with God in which words must often give way to silence and attentive listening. Here though is perhaps the key to resolving this connection: God speaks, we hear, we talk. However, this Word of God, first uttered in creation, is also the Word become incarnate as the God-Man Jesus Christ, as set out in the Gospel of St. John:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. ... And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”(John 1:14, 16-18)

We must therefore confess that in the Incarnation God has revealed himself, spoken if you will, in the flesh. “Theology” therefore must be infused thoroughly not only with the Person of Jesus Christ who is the Word, timelessly begotten of the Father but also with the Holy Spirit timelessly proceeding from the Father who guides the Church into truth, [*John 16:13*]. Orthodox theology then is both thoroughly Trinitarian and personal in character as between God, humankind and the Cosmos.¹

There is a further important point about the relationship between prayer and theology. Prayer can either be personal or corporate, that is, either by an individual or a group. In contrast to Evagrius’s insights on personal prayer and theological reflection, Manuel Sumares has pointed out that much sound theology originates not with an individual, but in corporate worship, that is, in the liturgy:

Given that so much of current theological production has been academic in character, it is good to be reminded of Christian theology’s origins in liturgy. It is, after all, in the corporate desire of believers to celebrate the God revealed in Christ as present amid them, that a particular form of life with its own ‘grammar’ comes about. Dogmatic definitions are bound to arise so that their beliefs may be formulated in such a way that their content expresses norms of right-thinking and right-praxis [that is, practice] to be held in common.²

Thus for Sumares it is appropriate that the prayer of the Church should “be squarely placed in the middle of what theology is meant to bring into being”—unity between humanity and God. Only then is “the theo-logian ... to be taken literally as the one who is immersed in the Word (*Logos*) who is God (*Theos*), and can say so from personal experience, for he has, in truth, attained spiritual knowledge, or *gnosis*” through the study of theology.³ That is the challenge for each of us as we begin this course—to link our prayer (both personal and corporate) and our study of theology in a unified search for God.

Orthodox Theology Is Inexact Because of the Transcendence of God

¹ See Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), Chapter 2, “The Dogma of the Trinity,” pp. 77-106.

² Manuel Sumares, “On Being a Theologian and Praying Truly: Evagrius of Pontus’s Challenging Thesis; (5) Making the argument for Orthodox Christianity: internet link not now available, original source unknown. Accessed 7 October 2013.

³ *Ibid.*

It is clear that theology in the Orthodox Church must be inexact because of the overwhelming transcendence of God—He-Who-Is, as declared to Moses from the Unburned Bush, far beyond any human conceiving or discourse in Himself, because we cannot put God as it were in a box, tie Him down. There is mystery in the Name, that is, in His essence or nature, not accessible to humans. The words of the prophet Isaiah are just as true for Christians as for Jews: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8-9). As we strive to relate to God and to understand His thoughts about His creation and about how our lives might best be united to Him, a first step is to reflect upon the Book of Proverbs and its abiding awareness that “The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honour” (Proverbs 15:33). Precisely because God exists outside the material or created world, our knowledge of Him will be limited, gained in holy fear and humility.

In the midst of our growing awareness of the transcendence of God, there is also an important distinction to be made between the Creator and His creation in their respective natures and their existence.⁴ Talk about God is possible because the creation itself bears the imprint of its Creator in the glory, beauty and wisdom of its existence. Talk about God is possible because He has revealed Himself. Deacon John Chryssavgis is wise to point out that “words communicate the pregnancy of divine life when we approach them in a spirit of humility and with a sense of awe”⁵. Present in the creation itself is the unity of revelation, both in the created order and in the actions of God, yet nonetheless, for all this there are limits to our knowing and our talking of God. Only God can exhaust the fullness of God in the sense of knowing Him completely, because there is no exhaustion in knowing the fullness of God, but His creation is both contingent and finite because God is beyond even infinity.

Our words about Him and His ways must always be, therefore, and necessarily, approximations, inexact. True knowledge moves outward from thoughts, words and speech but then also beyond speech into negation, that is, a reverent silence in which we must confess what God is *not* and what we *don't know*. (We shall have more to say about this in lecture 2 of this unit module, “God - Known and Unknown.”) This is what the Orthodox call ‘apophatic theology,’ understanding what God is not.

⁴ See Elizabeth Theokritoff, “Creator and creation” in: Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 63-77.

⁵ John Chryssavgis, “The spiritual way,” in Cunningham & Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, pp. 150-162. The quotation is from p. 150.

A good example here might be the statement: “God is Light” - which is scriptural and completely within and in accordance with the Tradition of the Church, a positive affirmation, ‘God is Light’. On its own, however, this is not enough. We must also say that in a very important sense “God is NOT Light.” In confessing this we are making it clear that God is not a wave-like bunch of photons that excites our physical sense of sight. God is the Uncreated Light made known in His energies which are nothing more or less than Himself. We might say that ‘God is *like* light’ but that would not get us very far because God cannot be compared to anything created. We use ‘light’ because it helps us connect with God who is the Uncreated Light, the Light that has neither beginning nor end. True theology therefore if it wants to encapsulate this sublime meaning of the Light of God, the Light of Christ must stretch, almost to breaking point, to touch this mystery.

This is why theology is given birth in and not only expressed in the words and thoughts expressed by theologians but also in worship, in prayer and praise—the liturgy and hymns of the Church—and why the most sublime and “truth-full” theology is often expressed in poetry and not in scholastic definitions, by which I mean the works of those who seek to understand God in the exercise of logic and reason. In this continuing quest to know God more fully, the Church rightly honours with the title ‘theologian’ but three: St. John the Evangelist, St. Gregory of Nazianzen and St. Symeon (the New Theologian). Without that title, but no less esteemed, we have that great harp of the Spirit, St. Ephraim the Syrian who expounded this theology through poetry, and the teacher, St. John of Damascus, who with others were not content simply to define doctrine but also to celebrate in worship and prayer a theology that radiated the love of Christ to their generation.

Orthodox Theology Is Experiential Because of the Immanence of God.

Although Orthodox theology is inexact, it is also experiential because it is grounded in the personal relations between God, His People and the Cosmos,⁶ between God and His People in the covenants and between God and the Cosmos in the natural order of created things. True, we need to distinguish between theory and practice in the awareness that prayer and action are distinct; however, the unity of prayer and action sets out the hope of a liberated humanity and Cosmos. The measure of Orthodoxy (true glory, right believing) is precisely measured by

⁶ See Nonna Verna Harrison, “The human person as image and likeness of God,” in Cunningham & Theokritoff (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, pp. 78-92.

Orthopraxy (right action). If Christ as God is Saviour, He is also Lord and He requires that we become “doers of the Word,” obedient servant-friends, followers of the Way.

Each of us are unique persons, yet we are saved from the secular desert of individualism because we live our lives in the midst of what Paul Evdokimov calls the “collegiality” of the human person,⁷ by which he means that being persons we are social animals and in our relationships we flower and mature as persons. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of Diokleia has pointed out:

Our fallen experience of time often involves a sense of boredom and repetition. But the restoration of the Divine image within us brings about a discovery or recovery of the radiance of the present moment. Here, now, at this very instant, I come face to face with the *kairos*, the moment of opportunity. Here, now, I hold infinity in the palm of my hand and eternity in an hour.⁸

None of this is possible without a direct, personal, communal and intimate experience of God, of God immanent. This has been the life of the Church from the beginning but throughout her history she has had to defend this insight against challenges from those who supposed that God’s transcendence removed Him from any direct perception of the faithful. In this she has shown that the intimate experience of the Presence of the reality of God immanent is attested to in creation itself, as well as in the special revelation of God’s actions, especially in the lives of the saints, God’s friends.

This is why, for example, the 14th century saint, Gregory Palamas, insisted in his debate with the sceptical Calabrian Greek monk Barlaam that God could be known by all in a most intimate, direct and experiential manner by all the faithful.⁹ He was not saying anything new here but the legacy of his mature reflection on the relationship between transcendence and immanence clarified the necessary distinction between what is unknowable and therefore inexact in our wording, that is pertaining to God’s essence or nature, and the perceptible, uncreated energies of God, His manifestation, His showing, His Presence, in the Old Testament and right the way through the New into the Life of the Church.

⁷ See Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of Diokleia, “Afterword” in Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2011/2013), p. 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ St. Gregory Palamas, “The Triads” *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983).

Applying these insights to the task of theology we must also therefore insist that our aim in this E-Quip course is to exercise both restraint before the mystery of God and confidence in the invitation to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” (*Psalms 34:8*). The reality that God is both transcendent and immanent means paradoxically that Orthodox theology will always be both inexact and experiential, empowering us to grow as Christians and to move away from that altar to an unknown God where St. Paul found Athenians worshiping in ignorance toward the living God who has made Himself known. Like the people of first century Athens, we too can still “seek God . . . and grope for Him and find Him, [for] He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist...” (Acts 17.23), which is of course St. Paul quoting from a Greek poet.

Conclusion: “Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice”

Finally, it is important to remember that the act of “doing theology”— seeking God, groping for Him and finding Him, in St Paul’s words, takes place in the Church. The Church learns from Truth, which is Christ wherever it may be found—in the sciences, the arts, the humanities, philosophy; indeed also in the insights of other religions. Sometimes it is asked whether or not it is necessary for Christians to have this extensive education but here we might refer to St. Basil who counselled especially those preparing to serve the Church’s mission precisely to acquire this. In his day a good education comprised natural philosophy (science), mathematics, logic, rhetoric, literature and poetry. St. Basil expected such study from his students in order to give them a rounded understanding of the world that they lived in so that they could preach the gospel more effectively. We have his famous reference to the bee ¹⁰ taking nectar from various plants, making wonderful honey and also great rivers that have many streams and rivulets. In other words we need to irrigate our intellects and our hearts with the widest possible appreciation of truth, but with discrimination of course, for wherever there is truth and anyone sincerely seeks it, there he will find Christ. When, however, we are talking about revealed truth, when we encounter God, we know that this reliably takes place in the Church. Of course it also happens elsewhere but as Christians we do our theology in the Church because in the Church, imbued with the Spirit and God’s sacramental Presence in the Holy Mysteries, we have His assurance that He is with us and will not desert us.

Rather than focus on Pontius Pilate’s enigmatic question, “What is truth?” we would do well to remember Christ’s affirmation which so perplexed Pilate, that He had “come into the

¹⁰ St. Basil the Great, ‘*Address to young men on the right use of Greek literature*’ IV, X - cited in ‘*Essays on the Study and Use of Poetry by Plutarch and Basil the Great*,’ F. M. Padelford, trans., Yale Studies in English, Vol. XV; New York, Holt and Co. 1902.

world, to testify to the truth” and “everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37). It is because of the fullness of this Truth—both transcendently beyond our comprehension and yet immanently within our lives—that Orthodoxy looks to the Scriptures of the Church, the Fathers, the Liturgy itself the liturgical arts in iconography, Christian poets, thinkers, saints, ascetics and martyrs, ALL as authoritative mediators and controllers of a Tradition that is led by the Spirit into all truth. Note Holy Tradition, not traditionalism! There is a difference.

In this manner, there can be no disconnection in Orthodox theology, between God, humanity and the Cosmos itself, because all theology tends towards the life of the age to come when God will be “*all in all*” (1 Corinthians 15:28). The precise timing and experience of that age to come remains beyond our grasp during our lives on earth; however, its spiritual imminence is quite real. So, we yearn and long for that day when the knowledge and love of God may be so perceptible in all creation that we will have achieved that which is promised, the New Creation, in which we shall take our place by the grace of God as sons and daughters of the Most High, as living men and women and children, free in Christ.

Bibliography

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