

## THE CHRISTOCENTRISM OF ORTHODOX ETHICS

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the foundational principles of Orthodox ethics, highlighting its emphasis on divinization and salvation through Christ. Unlike natural ethics, which prioritize human effort and rationality, Orthodox ethics is deeply rooted in theological concepts where the progression toward divine likeness is facilitated through God's grace and the believer's personal relationship with Christ. It discusses the ontological change in believers as they unite with Christ, who is central to Orthodox moral life. The article also explores the Incarnation's significance as the pathway for humanity's divine connection, emphasizing Christ's role as both the model and the operative force within the moral and spiritual journey of believers.*

**Keywords:** dogma; doxology; confession; hymn; gnosis; Church; mission.

### INTRODUCTION

In Byzantine patristic literature we do not find systematic treatises on Orthodox ethics or religious behavior, encountering rather ascetical and phylocalic writings on prayer and spirituality, on the mystical experience and vision of God in uncreated light, on the divinization of man. *Orthodox moral theology takes place within the process of the divinization of man in Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church, through the actualization of the divine image as an ontological given, in God-likeness.*

This means that Orthodox ethics is first and foremost a *theological ethics* based on an *ontology of salvation as divinization*. Orthodox ethics is not understood as the mere fulfillment of external duties without repercussions on the very being of the Christian, assuring him only formally, as a retribution for his actions, of eternal salvation. Rather, it is the gradual union with God through Christ and in Christ, in the Holy Spirit, right from within earthly life, a union that produces in man an ontological change of nature, a normalization and actualization of human powers, but also a transfiguration beyond their limit, drawing on divine power. "Deification takes place in the believer's participation in divine powers through the diffusion of divine trespass in him."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Orthodox ethics is a theological ethics also means that it cannot be a "natural" ethics that starts from man toward God, a mere human ethics analyzed within the horizon of faith and based solely on reason. Therefore, Orthodox theology asserts that man does not possess all the strength and all the means that can lead him to perfection in God.

It is not through training that awakens and sharpens these latent forces that man can be perfected, but through a living and personal connection with God, who gives man His grace. God is not an object but a Person and as such, cannot be known without His initiative.

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1 Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă. Ascetica și mistica*, EIBMBOR, București, 1992, p. 6.

## 1. CHRISTOCENTRISM IN ORTHODOX ETHICS

Orthodox ethics is therefore connected to the ontology of salvation. Christianity is the religion of salvation in Christ, who has objectively restored us through his death and resurrection. *The subjective personal level appropriation of this objective salvation by each believer constitutes the object of orthodox moral theology.* "Morality is the subjective appropriation of objective salvation."<sup>2</sup>

"For the Orthodox Church, Christ's redemptive work does not belong only to the past. He does not look down now only from heaven as those who believe in the efficiency of his saving work accomplished in his earthly life, take possession through faith of the outcome of his sacrifice in the cross[...] The Orthodox Church believes that Christ saves us since, after he became incarnate, suffered crucifixion, rose again and lifted up, he *joins us in all times* communicating and imprinting in our humanity, through the Holy Spirit, the condition of his sinless born humanity. [...] *Our personal salvation comes through Christ's dwelling in us and our working from his power.*"<sup>3</sup>

Here are the definitions that Metropolitan Nicolae Mladin, professor of moral theology and main author of the handbook of moral theology for the Orthodox theology faculties of the Romanian Orthodox Church, a handbook still in use, makes of Christian ethics: "In fact, Christian morality is not a code of laws, a set of commandments. However, it is not only that and not especially that. Christian morality is first and foremost life, our life in Christ. Consequently, at the center of Christian morality are not the "tables of the law," but Jesus Christ. Christocentrism is the essential character of Christian morality, of orthodox morality. In Christ and for Christ this morality is a spirit of new life, a creative and renewing force. It is an extension of Christ's holiness in the lives of the faithful."<sup>4</sup> . Morality is "the theological discipline that systematically presents the teaching on life in Christ, with Christ and for Christ so that, by living in conformity with that teaching, the Christian may procure salvation."<sup>5</sup>

Since Christian morality is not understood in Orthodoxy as a set of commandments, it does not mean that it excludes the commandments, neglects them or circumvents them for the sake of a personal relationship with Christ who is present and always alive. This would lead to moral anarchy and pietism in which the relationship of the faithful with Christ would be a merely psychological one. In Orthodox ethics, the commandments have, however, no intrinsic value because they reveal to those who obey them, Christ, the giver of the commandments.

"The Lord is hidden in His commandments, and those who seek Him find Him by the measure of their obedience to them,"<sup>6</sup> states St. Mark the Ascetic. St. Maximus the Confessor states, in turn, that "the substance of all virtues is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself."<sup>7</sup>

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2 Basil PETRÀ, *Tra cielo e terra. Introduzione alla teologia morale ortodossa contemporanea*, Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, Bologna 1992, 31.

3 Dumitru STĂNILOAIE, «Drumul cu Hristos Mântuitorul prin Sfintele Taine și sărbătorile Bisericii Ortodoxe», in *Ortodoxia*, 2(1976), 403.

4 Nicolae MLADIN, *Studii de teologie morală*, Sibiu 1969, 188-189.

5 Nicolae MLADIN, Orest BUCEVSCHI, Constantin PAVEL, Ioan ZĂGREAN, *Teologia morală ortodoxă pentru facultățile de teologie*, Vol.1, Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia 2003<sup>2</sup>, 6.

6 *Philocalia*, translation Dumitru STĂNILOAIE, Humanitas, Bucuresti 2004, vol. 1, 152.

7 Maxim The CONFESSOR, *Ambigua. Problemi metafisici e teologici su testi di Gregorio di Nazianzo e Dionigi Areopagita*, Edizione Bompiani Il Pensiero Occidentale, Milano 2003, 225. (P.G. 91, 1081C)

Hidden in His commandments, the person of Christ is presented not only as an ideal model, worthy of imitation, but also as an ever-active force in the moral life of the faithful. Through the sacraments, beginning with Baptism and culminating in the Eucharist, the Christian enters communion with Christ, so that he no longer lives him, but Christ lives in him, in the words of St. Paul. And this is not just a simple external influence through imitation, but it is something much deeper, a certain spiritual symbiosis that is created between Christ and the believer through grace and love, so much so that every believer can become an alter Christ according to grace. "The Lord is hidden in his commandments not only as a norm, as a model crumbled into principles of action, but also as a personal force operating in them."<sup>8</sup>

We perform moral duty, the commandments of Christ, not to collect merits that will guarantee a later reward, but to discover more and more Christ present and working in our lives, to make more and more room for our personal relationship with Christ. Consequently, Orthodox morality also has a pronounced personalist character. As Greek theologian Panayotis Nellias argues, moral life "is not a life of laws and dispositions, but a life of sharing, of friendship and love, of union and sharing with God."<sup>9</sup>

The person of Christ does not call me toward her to become similar to her by imitation and the action of my own strength, but at the same time also gives me the strength to come toward her. He does not call me from afar, but accompanies me, being close to me as a friend, supporting me and giving me strength from his strength. Life in Christ means a gradual filling from the working presence of Christ to the extent of the believer's personal identification with the life of Christ himself.

Therefore, the mystery of the person becomes the ontological foundation of our development in moral life through life in Christ. The anthropological foundation of life in Christ is the creation of man in the image of God, and the Christological foundation is the hypostatic union in which God became the subject i.e., hypostasis of human nature by divinizing it on the one hand, and on the other hand by also empowering man to be divinized through union with the divine Word accessible now in his humanity.

The essence of moral life as life in Christ is clearly noted by the expression of St. Paul the Apostle, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). All biblical expressions that speak of man's union with Christ have not been interpreted by the Orthodox tradition as mere analogies, but *ad litteram*, with real content. St. Paul's exhortations and remarks (Colossians 1:14-18; 1:28; 2:10; Ephesians 4:13; 1 Corinthians 2:16; Ephesians 3:17) were not launched for mere reasons of piety or sentimentality; he speaks ontologically. He does not exhort to purely ethical outward imitation of Christ, but to the real Christification of the believer.

How is this Christification, which means a change in the ontological scope of the believer, through life in Christ possible? Since Christ is truly and immediately the measure of man, the Way, Truth and Life of man, that is, *life in Christ, existence in Christ and perfection in Christ and with Christ*.

## 2. THE EXISTENCE IN CHRIST

In the patristic interpretation, in the footsteps of St. Paul, the image of God that constituted the pattern of man's creation is precisely the Word i.e., the Son of God (Colossians 1:15; 1 Corinthians 15:49). So Christ is the Archetype of man, and man is the

8 Dumitru STĂNILAOE, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă...*, 41.

9 Panayotis NELLAS, *Voi siete dei. Antropologia dei Padri della Chiesa*, Città Nuova, Roma 1993, a137.

icon of the Archetype, or image of the Image (eikon Eikonos). Connecting the Pauline theme of "Christ the image of the Hypostasis of the Father" with the Genesis theme of man's creation in the image of God, the ontological concentration of man in Christ results.

This means that man's ontological truth is not found in himself independently, in his attributes or natural forces, but in his Archetype. Man presents an iconic ontology.

"Looking to this goal (to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ) God brought into existence all the essences of what exists" <sup>10</sup>, says St. Maximus the Confessor. St. Nicholas Cabasilas writes in turn, "for He (Christ) was our Archetype when we were created. For not the Old Adam is the model of the New, but rather the New Adam is the model of the Old." <sup>11</sup>.

Man is united with Christ, his eternal Archetype, by an ontological, not moral, relationship. Man is ontologically centered in Christ, the Creator Logos. The mystery of man consists in the Image of the Son that ontologically grounds him. Therefore, in this moral evolution toward perfection-divinization, man can only be ontologically transfigured by having Christ as his measure.

This iconic ontology of man as the foundation of his connection, not only outwardly but also inwardly with Christ, his Truth, was expressed by Panayotis Nellas through the analogy of the icon:

Just as the truth of the icon resides in the person painted therein, so too the truth of man resides in his model. This is precisely because the model is the one who arranges, seals and configures matter and at the same time attracts it. The model (the archetype) represents the ontological content of the image. This has great significance for the moral life of the believer, since it is also actualized in Christ as the fulfillment of the ontological truth of man.

### 3. THE PERFECTION IN CHRIST

Christ is not, however, only the Truth of man. He is also his Life. Not only is his constitution Christocentric but also his destiny. Christ is also the goal of our moral perfecting, a dynamic goal of endless perfecting. God is without end and therefore the telos of union with Him, or of our moral growth is boundless in His infinitude, it is an unceasing progress. Man was created not only according to Christ as His image, but also toward Christ, with a view to union with Christ. The image of Christ in us is not yet as perfect as Christ Himself is, but it still needs His perfection, a perfection that man possesses in himself only potential and that he continually strives to implement. The only way to authentically implement this image of God in us is according to the measure of the perfect life of Christ, since ontologically, man is centered in Him.

The creation of man for Christ is presented this way by St. Nicholas Cabasilas:

"For for the New Man man's nature was shaped, and mind and desire were created for Him. We have, therefore, received reflection to know Christ, desire to run toward Him, and memory to keep Him [...] even by nature and by will and by thoughts, man yearns for Christ [...] Whom is the telos of all things [...] and to love or think anything else but Him is a manifest sin [...] it is a deviation from the foundation put from the beginning at the basis of our nature." <sup>12</sup>.

If from the beginning man was constituted toward Christ this means that His incarnation does not depend on man's fall into original sin. "Christ is not an *episode*, a mere

10 St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium*, PG 90, 621A.

11 St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *De vita in Cristo*, VI, PG 150, 681A.

12 St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *De vita in Cristo*, VI, PG 150, 681B.

*event* in the course of history. The incarnation of God the Word does not constitute a mere effect of the devil's victory over man, Christ is not the consequence of an action of Satan. The union of human nature with divine nature could take place because it constituted the pre-eternal will of God."<sup>13</sup>

Only in Christ does human ontology reach its authentic fullness as each seed is fulfilled by developing into what is appropriate to it. The fulfillment of human nature consists in developing to the measure of Christ as St. Paul states: "whom I again give birth to in sorrow until Christ is formed in you"(Jas 4:19).

The theme of the image of God in man linked to the Archetype, an image that needs growth to the likeness of God, a likeness now made possible by the incarnation of Christ, constitutes in Orthodoxy the axis around which moral theology is built, emphasizing its Christocentric character. "Being 'in the image' is a real potentiality, a kind of betrothal that leads to marriage."<sup>14</sup> It is not already God-likeness but a possibility, a power, a responsibility, a basis for evolution toward God-likeness. "The ontological principle of man does not rest in his biological being but in his being in Christ; and since the realization of being in Christ constitutes a process from the condition of "image" toward the image itself or from iconic being to real being: history can properly conceive of itself as the realization of this process."<sup>15</sup>

The law of all moral action demands that action corresponds with compelling consistency to ontological foundations. To be a man, he must become what he was molded to be.

#### 4. THE LIFE IN CRIST

Yet, this divine-human and Christocentric constitution of man, even before the incarnation of the Word, is not totally external to God or autonomous. According to the doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas, God's energies are not isolated from His Being instead they are uncreated energies flowing from His Being. Wherever the effect of an operative energy of God is produced, the very generating energy of such an effect must also be present. Therefore, everything has, right down to its innermost being, the presence of an operant force of God. Because of this operating force, each of us is from the beginning, in some way, in union with God. We are therefore, from the beginning, in an ontological bond with God, through an His power present in us through the nature given to us at creation<sup>16</sup>. Ethics makes us aware of this bond.

The power of the divine Word as the Archetype of man is made present to us only from his human nature by virtue of his hypostatic union. Only the incarnation makes life in Christ possible. Consequently, the nature of every human hypostasis potentially stands in mysterious connection with the human nature of the divine-human hypostasis of Christ. Through a living and working faith, this bond becomes more and more concrete, and human nature receives the power of Christ's divinized human nature.

Man cannot realize the actualization of the image, existence in Christ, in the likeness, perfection in Christ, by himself, with his own forces, even if they are not absent. This can be

13 13 Panayotis NELLAS, *Voi sietei dei...*, 50-51.

14 *Ibid.* 50.

15 *Ibid.*, 54

16 Father Stăniloae accepts and introduces in his *Dogmatic Theology* vol. 2, 11-12, the theory of Karl Rahner (K. RAHNER, *Grundlinien einer systematischen Christologie* in Karl RAHNER, Wilhelm THÜSSING, *Christologie systematisch und exegetisch dargestellt*, Herder, 1972, 62-63) on "transcendent Christology," namely "a need for Christs inscribed in the spiritual constitution of man."



realized only in and from the relationship with the Archetype and Telos of our life, a relationship possible and accessible in His humanization. God became man and therefore man can become god. He can do so, however, only by reactivating the original relationship with God in Christ, God-Man. Man does not become a god parallel to God or external to Him, as the devil had urged Adam, but rather becomes god in God and together with Him, in and from relationship with Him. This relationship is made possible in the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ. Therefore, even the way from the image to the likeness cannot be implemented apart from Christ. Christ is the Way of man's moral perfection not only as Truth but also as Life. *Christ is the Life of man's moral life.*

The perfection of the faithful is realized only in Christ, participating in His divine-human life to unite with Him and to imprint in His face the face of Christ's God-filled humanity. From the bond with Christ a filling of man from the working presence of God is realized.

Father Staniloae states along these lines, "What essentially distinguishes Christian spirituality from any other spirituality is, beyond the fact that it does not affirm man's identification with divinity or total essence, its Christocentric character. That is, the ascent of Christians toward God has, not only as its norm but also as its way, Jesus Christ, in accordance with His declaration, *"I am the way"* (John 14:6). No one can walk toward mysterious union with God by walking any other way than Christ, and no one, in this union, can reach beyond Christ."<sup>17</sup>.

Jesus Christ is the only mediator that God has given to mankind so that they may walk toward Him, for "through Him we can present ourselves, one to another, to the Father in one Spirit" (Ephesians 2:18) and therefore any other union with God that is not realized through Christ and in Christ is an illusion.

In Incarnation, the Word came into our closest proximity and ontological connection with us as the possessor of human nature. Through Him God became more transparent and accessible to man. Therefore, in the Incarnation, the way by which we walk toward God we walk with Him and in Him.

"This ascent we do not make by our own individual strength as an endeavor for which we would conquer the divinity that stands, passive and impersonal, before us. Instead, we find ourselves in an unceasing bond with Christ, who stands beside us supporting our journey, but also in front of us as a model, calling us toward Him and toward an ever fuller communion with Him, just as a friend better than you in everything is beside you on the path you take toward moral perfection, but also above you, always stimulating you."<sup>18</sup>.

The God-likeness to which we strive through our potentially divine-human image can only be obtained in His Image, in His divinized humanity. In order to transfigure our image according to His perfect Image, He does not only stand before us outwardly as an attractive model. He Himself becomes interior to us in the innermost part of our being, so that from there, as an active personal force, we may imprint the perfect features of His Face in our face. That is why in the Orthodox phylocal tradition it is affirmed that in Baptism Christ comes to dwell in the deepest sanctuary of our being, in the hearth of being, as the center of all the spiritual dynamisms of man, the heart.

"This temple, namely, the holy abode of body and spirit, also has a place in the inner part of the iconostasis. There Christ entered as the forerunner, dwelling in us beginning at

<sup>17</sup> Dumitru STĂNILAOE, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă...*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 40

baptism."<sup>19</sup> . Or, as St. Paul says, "*Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ dwells in you? Unless the evidence is against you!*" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

In the heart of man Christ is present as a hidden power accompanying the believer on the path of moral perfection through purification from sins and the acquisition of virtues, leading the believer for what He is past: for death as the mortification of the passions and the killing of the old man, and for resurrection as the birth to a new life in Christ, the New Man. These are not events and are not consecutive. Instead, they are dynamic states that take place gradually and concomitantly.

Consequently, Christ's earthly life is repeated with each of us, as a mysterious walk of the Lord in us from birth to Tabor, death and Resurrection. Each of us is a contemporary of Christ, or rather He becomes a contemporary of us out of love, making Himself an intimate participant in the trajectory of our lives, spiritually imprinting His Face more and more in our faces capable of welcoming Him and adjusting to Him. Our face changes by resembling Him not only from an external stimulus but also from an internal one.

There is an empathy between our person and Christ's based on the sensitivity of love, an empathy similar to that between two people who love each other. "Jesus participates in all our sufferings by alleviating them, he carries with us the struggles against temptations and our sins, he commits himself together with us to the virtues."<sup>20</sup> . St. Maximus the Confessor states in this regard, "Until the end of the world (Christ) mysteriously always suffers together with us out of His goodness, in concordance with the suffering found in everyone."<sup>21</sup> .

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Orthodox ethics fundamentally revolves around the central figure of Christ, emphasizing a transformative and ontological journey toward salvation and divinization. Unlike purely natural or humanistic ethical systems that rely on personal effort and rational understanding, Orthodox ethics insists on a profound connection with God, enabled by divine grace. This Christocentric approach underscores that moral life is not a mere adherence to commandments or rituals but a deep, personal union with Christ, who is both the model and the active force within believers.

The process of "christification" signifies an ontological transformation wherein the believer, through participation in the sacraments and a living relationship with Christ, is gradually conformed to the divine image. This transformation is neither static nor superficial but a dynamic, lifelong pursuit of perfection within the boundless divine love and guidance. Through the Incarnation, Christ becomes the accessible pathway for humanity to unite with God, serving as both the destination and the guiding presence on this spiritual journey. The role of divine energies further emphasizes that this connection is active and ongoing, deeply embedding the divine presence in human life.

Ultimately, Orthodox ethics calls believers to a profound and personal engagement with Christ, facilitating a moral and spiritual ascent toward God-likeness. This transformative journey is at the heart of Orthodox Christian life, where ethics and spirituality are inseparable from the living, active presence of Christ in the believer's life. Through this union, believers not only seek to reflect Christ outwardly but also experience an inward transfiguration, making Christ's life their own.

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19 Mark ASCETIC, *Philocalia*, vol. 1, 287.

20 Dumitru STĂNILĂ, *Spiritualitatea ortodoxă...*, 42.

21 Maximus THE CONFESSOR, *Mystagogy*, P.G. 91, 713.

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