

Metropolitan Anthony Krapovitsky: The Difference Between Orthodoxy and Western Confessions



Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) of Kiev and Galich, 1863-1936, *was one of the most highly respected and deeply loved Orthodox hierarchs of our times, a candidate for the restored Patriarchal See of Moscow in 1917, organizer and first primate of the Russian Church Abroad, and the spiritual father of the whole generation of Orthodox, most of all -- of St. John the Wonderworker of Shanghai and San Francisco . A careful and discerning reader of this article, first published in 1911 in St. Petersburg, will not only learn much about the historical ways of Christianity, but also gain insight into the legacy of the past century and the challenges we are about to face in the next one.*

Way Apart

What is the Difference Between Orthodoxy and

Western Confessions?

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What is the Difference Between Orthodoxy and Western Confessions?

Answering this question, quite a few educated Russians would mention the rites, -- but we hardly need wasting time on this sort of nonsense. Not much closer to the truth, however, is another opinion, fairly common among those who are better versed in theology. They would tell us about the *filioque*, about Papal supremacy and other teachings rejected by Orthodoxy, and also about the teachings of both Latin and Orthodox faiths which are rejected by the Protestants. It would turn out that Orthodoxy has no specific substance of her own, equally unfamiliar to all of the European confessions. But because they have originated one from another, we might expect that there are certain treasures of Christ's truth which cannot be found in any of them: a heresy born of another heresy must keep some part of the parent if it is not returning to the True Church.

The **Slavophile theologians** , Khomiakov in particular, were the first to draw the line between the true Church and the Western denominations based not on any particular dogmatic element, but rather on the general preference of the inner ideal of Orthodoxy. This is Khomiakov's outstanding contribution to theology, to the Church, as well as to the enlightened West, which appreciated it as high as the Russian religious writers. It is most clearly seen in the fact that all European theologians friendly to Orthodoxy speak of her in Khomiakov's terms, using precisely his formulations of the confessional differences. Specifically, the Old Catholics, who have been attracted to Orthodoxy and got involved in lengthy official correspondence concerning a rapprochement with us, follow his views in their presentation of the main questions which, in their opinion, divide us and Old Catholicism -- that is, the *filioque* as an innovation contrary to Church discipline, which calls us to "guard the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace", and transubstantiation in the Eucharist as a borrowing from Western theologians, foreign to the Church tradition (which speaks about change).

Khomiakov's short book [*The Church Is One* and a few other essays] is the most popular of all Russian theological works, both among our own learned men and abroad. We shall not, therefore, elaborate on it. Just let us recall that he makes the distinction between the denominations based on their understanding of the ninth clause of the Creed -- that is, on their teaching about the Church. Presenting the Orthodox teaching on the Truth, severely distorted and almost lost everywhere in the non-Orthodox West, Khomiakov aptly demonstrates the moral significance of our spiritual ideal, the overall preference of our faith in contrast to the Western confessions which have lost one of the most holy, uplifting truths of Christianity.

Khomiakov sees the Church not so much as an authority, but rather as a **union of souls**, complementing one another by their mystical communion with Christ Who reveals Himself to the faithful only in their mutual love, in their unity (epitomized by the the Ecumenical Councils). In all issues of Church discipline, and in the very process of exploring the divine truth -- just as this has been established by Church tradition -- he brings a spirit of joy, a spirit alien to

subjugation, a spirit carrying us into the boundless space of communion with the whole world of the faithful, with all eternity.

Thus, we admit without reservations that Khomiakov has correctly presented the Orthodox teaching about the Church, and that he has clearly shown the value of Orthodoxy compared to the Western denominations, which have lost the understanding of the moral union of the faithful both in life and teaching, and which have reduced the Kingdom of God to the level of either a personal achievement or an external government-like organization. While recognizing this, and paying homage to Khomiakov for his great theological and missionary works, we have to note that his definition of Orthodoxy or, in other words, of true, divinely-revealed Christianity, as opposed to the Western denominations, is **incomplete**. It has long been our wish to complete it.

ii. Western Theology and Christian Life

Actually, the difference between them is much deeper. The teaching about the Church is, of course, extremely important, as our communion has to be renewed continually in our minds. But even apart from the Church question, in the way one approaches God and one's own life, a great difference is felt between a non-Orthodox Westerner and an Orthodox.

Things great and small are permeated by this difference. Take for example the sources of instruction in our personal spiritual life. One part of them, which we study in schools as dogmatic and moral theology, is a borrowing from the Catholics and Protestants: only the plainest errors of non-Orthodoxy, known to all and condemned by the church authorities, are deleted. Another part, well known both to educated and common men, in our time and in the past, back to the IX century and earlier, is in our prayers, hymns of the divine services, and the moral teachings of the Holy Fathers.

But what a remarkable thing! There is almost nothing in common between the two sources. Certified theologians do not know our Prologues, our dogmatic hymns (stichera and canons), our Lives of the

Saints -- except, maybe, as simple church-goers, as lovers of church music, but not as religious scholars. Meanwhile, these Slavonic writings in thick, clumsy books are the main, if not the only, origin and nourishment of the living Russian faith, for both the common men and the more educated. But official theology cannot tap this source, even out of mere curiosity.

Now look at the best Christians among us, our teachers of Christian life: Hieroschemamonk Ambrose of Optina [+1891], Father John of Kronstadt [+1909], Bishop Theophan the Recluse [+1894; all three have since been glorified as saints]. By no means can they be called narrow-minded or ignorant; they are grateful graduates of our seminaries and academies, but try to find borrowings from and references to academic theology in their writings. Except for a few scattered instances, there are none.

Offer them mountains of scholarly volumes to help in their teaching; they will treat them with respect but, believe me, will find nothing to borrow. The same will be true for the ordinary Christian who seeks understanding of any event or religious experience. It is quite obvious that **our scholarly theology, having been built upon Western principles, even though free of the Western errors, is so far removed from the Orthodox spiritual reality, so little related to it, that not only is it useless as a source of instruction, but it cannot even come close to the real spiritual life.**

This could not have happened had the Western theology been different from the Orthodox only in the Church-related teachings. As we see, the Western religions have altered the very notion of Christian life, of its aims and conditions.

iii. A Case of the Two Teachers

Once, as the Rector of the Theological Academy, I gave an assignment to a gifted student: Compare and contrast the moral teachings of Bishop Theophan with those of Martensen. Martensen is a venerable Protestant preacher, recognized as an outstanding moral theologian, influenced less than others by confessional errors. Bishop Theophan is

an educated Russian theologian, former rector of St. Petersburg Theological Academy. And you know what? It turns out that the two authors present Christian morality in a totally different, often opposite way. Here is the summary of the results:

Bishop Theophan teaches how to make one's life meet the standards of Christian perfection, while the Western Bishop (*sit venia verbo*) takes from Christianity only as much as is consistent with the standards of modern secular life. That is, the former accepts Christianity as the **eternal** foundation of normal life, and demands that we forcibly change ourselves to bring our lives into compliance with that norm; the latter accepts the realities of modern secular life as unchangeable, and only where they allow some variations does he indicate which options are **preferred** from the Christian viewpoint. The former calls for moral heroism, for a life-long struggle; the latter selects whatever elements of Christianity are suited to us in our current way of life. For the former, the true life to which man is called is the life eternal, while our current life on earth with all its historically shaped devices is all but an **illusion**; for the latter the notion of the future life is merely an uplifting, noble idea, an idea which contributes to continual improvement of our **real life** here on earth.

In the difference between these two teachers of morality is manifest the difference between the Orthodox faith and Western religions. One is based upon the concept of **Christian perfection**, or sanctity, and from this standpoint evaluates the present reality; the other is firmly established on the *status quo* of the earthly life and strives to determine the minimum of **religious practice** which still allows for salvation -- if eternity truly exists.

iv. Sublime and Basic Principle

-- You are pointing not at the false belief, but at the poor religious attitudes in the West! -- our critics will say.

-- That's correct, -- we will reply, -- thus far we have been concerned with the attitudes, with the degeneration of Western religious life and thought; now let us look into a sublime principle which they have lost.

Christianity is a life-long pursuit of virtue. Christianity is a pearl for which the wise merchant of the Gospel parable has had to sell all his possessions. It would seem that in the course of history this self-denying step, this taking up of the cross, meant different things: at the time of the earthly life of the Savior it was joining His disciples and following Him; later it became confession of faith and martyrdom; then, from the fourth to the twentieth centuries, -- seclusion and monasticism. In fact, however, these various exploits were only the means towards one end, one goal -- gradual attainment of spiritual perfection on earth, of the freedom from passions, of all virtues, -- just as we ask in the prayer of St. Ephraim, repeating it over and over during Great Lent with many bows and prostrations:

[O Lord and Master of my life, the spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition, and idle talk give me not. *Prostration.*

But rather a spirit of chastity, humble-mindedness, patience, and love bestow upon me Thy servant. *Prostration.*

Yea, O Lord King, grant me to see my own failings and not to condemn my brother; for blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Prostration.]

"This is the will of God, your sanctification," -- says the Apostle; we can attain to it only by setting this as the main and the only goal of our life, by **living for the sake of holiness**. This is what the true Christianity is all about; this is the essence of Orthodoxy vs. the heterodoxy of the West. In this respect (and, consequently, by their nature) the Oriental heresies such as Monophysites and Armenians are much closer to Orthodoxy than are the Western: like us, they have set spiritual perfection as the goal of a Christian life, but they differ from us in the teachings about the conditions for the attainment of that goal.

v. Controversy over Perfection

-- *Do the Western Christians really say that there is no need for moral perfection? Would they deny that Christianity commands us to be perfect?*

-- They would not say that, but they don't see it as the essence of Christianity, either. Moreover, in **their view of perfection** and the means to attain it they would disagree with us on every word; they would not even understand, let alone agree, that it is precisely **moral** perfection that is the goal of a Christian life -- and not merely the knowledge of God (as Protestants would say) or service to the Church (Roman Catholics), for which virtues, in their opinion, God Himself gives us moral perfection as a reward.

Moral perfection is **gained** by intensive, strenuous effort, by inner struggle, by deprivations, and most of all -- by self-humiliation. An Orthodox Christian, by virtue of sincerely and diligently following the spiritual discipline, participates to a large extent in that struggle: the discipline itself is designed to facilitate our gradual mortification of passions and acquisition of blessed perfection. In this we are assisted by our divine services, by the efforts in preparation for the Holy Communion, by fasting, and by that almost monastic order of Orthodox life, codified in our Typicon and followed by our ancestors before Peter the Great, and by all those who live by the tradition up until this very day.

In short, **the Orthodox faith is an ascetic faith**; Orthodox theological thought -- that which does not lie a dead scholastic baggage, but influences our life and spreads among the people -- is a study of the ways of spiritual perfection. As such it is manifest in our church services through theological statements, references to Biblical events, commandments and reminders of the Last Judgement.

This, of course, is not foreign to the Western denominations either; but they understand salvation as an external reward given either for a certain amount of good deeds (also external), or for an unflinching faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ. They have no knowledge, nor interest, in how a soul should gradually free itself from the bondage of passions, of how we should go from strength to strength on our way to freedom from sin and fullness of virtues. There are ascetics in the West, to be sure, but their life is dominated by dejected, senseless obedience to the age-old rules and requirements, for which they are promised forgiveness of sins and future eternal life. **Eternal life has**

already appeared, as Apostle John says, and blessed communion with God is obtained by unflinching asceticism right now, in the words of St. Macarius the Great, -- all this is unknown to West.

This ignorance is growing worse and cruder. Thus, contemporary Western theologians have lost understanding of the aim of Christianity, of the reason for Christ's incarnation being just that -- **the moral perfection of man**. They have, as it were, lost their minds over the fable of Christ's coming to earth to give some sort of happiness to a mankind of some future ages -- even though He said with all clarity that His followers must bear a cross of suffering, that they would be continually persecuted by the world, by their own brethren, children, and even parents, especially towards the end.

The good things, which the believers in the "superstition of Progress" (a witty phrase by S.A.Rachinsky) are looking forward to, are in fact promised by the Savior in the future life, but neither the Latins nor the Protestants are willing to accept this for the simple reason that, frankly speaking, they believe quite feebly in the Resurrection, and quite strongly -- in the happy life here and now, which the Apostles, on the contrary, call a vanishing vapor (James 4:14). That is why the pseudo-Christian West will not and cannot understand the renunciation of this life by Christianity, which commands us to struggle **"having put off the old man with his deeds and having put on the new, which is renewed after the image of Him that created him"** [Col 3:9-10]

vi. Love, and How to Keep It

-- But Christianity is love of one's neighbor, and love is compassion in sorrows, -- modern men and especially women would say, -- and asceticism is a fabrication of monks.

I will not argue the first point as K. Leontiev [+1891, Russian author close to the Optina Elders] once did; moreover, I will admit that if love were at all possible without spiritual effort, without inner warfare, and without external labors, then neither of these would be necessary. But love dried up among men just when Luther began speaking on their

behalf. The prediction came true that **"for the multiplication of lawlessness the love of many will dry up."** In the absence of external labors and inner struggle, passions and lawlessness reign, and where sin is in control, love dries up and men begin to hate one another [Matt 24: 10]

Now let us turn to the second point. It is quite true that love is expressed most of all in compassion, but not so much for the material troubles of our fellow men as for their sinfulness, and this compassion is possible only for someone who is weeping for his own sins, that is, for a struggler.

Asceticism is a fabrication of monks... A Muscovite lady once made this point even more vividly: "Your whole religion is a fabrication of churchmen. I recognize only the Iveron Mother of God and Martyr Triphon (*I'iverskaya et Triphon le martyr*) [like most of the nineteenth-century Russian nobility the lady spoke French rather than Russian]; the rest is nonsense." This, of course, is a testimony to the ignorance of the meaning of asceticism among our educated class.

This concept does not in general predetermine the way of our life; it requires neither virginity, nor fasting, nor seclusion. Asceticism, or spiritual struggle, is a life filled with work on oneself, a life aimed at the destruction of one's own passions -- adultery, fornication, self-love, spite, envy, gluttony, laziness, etc., -- and filling the soul with the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love; love never survives as a stand-alone virtue, but always follows and helps accomplish other traits of a human soul mentioned above.

Certainly, a Christian willing to pursue his own way will discover that he has to withdraw from worldly distractions, to humble the flesh, and pray much more to God -- but these actions have no ultimate value in the eyes of God. They have value for us only as means to the acquisition of the gifts of the Spirit. Of much greater value is the spiritual struggle inside the human soul -- self-reproach, self-humiliation, self-resistance, self-constraint, introspection, vision of the Last Judgment and future life, control over feelings, struggle against evil thoughts, repentance and confession, wrath against sin and

temptation, etc, -- things totally unfamiliar to our modern learned men, and so clear and well-known to any faithful villager, present or past. This is precisely the spiritual alphabet mentioned by Bishop Tikhon of Zadonsk [+1783, glorified as saint] --

"There are two kinds of learned and wise men: some study in schools from books, and a great many of them are less intelligent than the simple and unlettered, since they do not know the Christian alphabet; they sharpen the mind, they correct and adorn words, but they do not wish to reform their hearts. Others who study in prayer with humility and diligence and are enlightened by the Holy Spirit are wiser than the philosophers of this age; they are devout and holy and beloved of God; although these do not know the alphabet, they well comprehend everything; they speak simply, crudely, but they live beautifully and auspiciously. These, O Christian, emulate". (III, 193).

-- and **this is the essence of true Christianity as a life-time effort.** Disregarded by the Western denominations, it is still at the center of all Orthodox theology which interprets the entire Divine revelation, all events and proverbs of the Bible, in the context of these stages of spiritual perfection.

Having been incarnate, humiliated, and afflicted by our sins, the Savior has granted us, in His Person and in communion with Him, an opportunity for this spiritual effort, which is the way to our salvation. Some follow it [Phil 2:12] voluntarily and consciously, living a spiritual life; others pass through almost against their will, reformed by sufferings sent from God and by the Church discipline; still others only facing their death correct their straying by repentance and receive enlightenment in the future life, but the meaning of the Christian endeavour is always in asceticism, in the work on one's soul; such is also the essence of Christian theology.

Ignorance vs. Reason

If we trace all follies of the West, those developed in its religion as well as those rooted in its customs, which are transmitted to us through the "window of Europe," we will see them all stemming from ignorance of the nature of Christian faith as a personal struggle for gradual self-

perfection. Such, for instance, is the Latino-Protestant concept of the Redemption as the revenge of the Divine Majesty, once offended by Adam, on Jesus Christ -- a concept which grew out of the feudal notion of knightly honor, restorable by shedding the blood of the offender; such is the material teaching about the Sacraments; such is also their teaching about the new instrument of Divine Revelation -- the Pope of Rome, whoever he might be in actual life; such, likewise, is the teaching of works of obligation and of supererogation. Such is, finally, the Protestant dogma of salvation through faith, which rejects the Church and her structure.

In all these fallacies Christianity is seen as something foreign to us, to our minds and hearts, some sort of negotiated agreement between us and the Godhead, stipulating, for reasons unknown, that we accept certain obscure statements and rules, and receive in return a reward of eternal salvation.

To defend themselves against obvious objections, Western theologians have reinforced their teachings on the alleged incomprehensibility not only of the nature of God, but also of the Divine Law, and sought -- like the scholastics, Luther, and even Ritschel in our times -- to condemn reason as the enemy of faith, while the Fathers of the Church, like St. Basil the Great and even St. Isaac the Syrian, see the enemy of faith not in reason, but rather in human stupidity, neglect, light-mindedness, and stubbornness.

Moral Values Revisited

Turning from religious errors to the moral values of the West, we see in some of them direct opposites of the Christian commandments, and these perversions are so firmly rooted in the foundation of Western social and personal life that even the greatest upheavals, which have toppled Christian altars and destroyed royal thrones, have not affected those savage and brutal prejudices. Thus, the Lord commands us to forgive -- but Western morality calls for revenge and bloodshed; the Lord demands that we humbly think of ourselves as great sinners -- but the West puts "*self-esteem*" above all; the Lord calls us to rejoice and be glad when we are persecuted and cast out -- but the West

seeks the "restoration of honor"; for the Lord and His Apostles pride is a demonic sin but for the West it is nobility.

The lowest Russian beggar, or even a half-believing native, a recent convert who has not yet completely parted with his pagan practices, can tell good from evil better than the moral authorities of the thousand-year old Western culture, a dismal mess of the shreds of Christianity with the delusions of antiquity.

And the reason for these follies is the failure to grasp the simple truth that **Christianity is an ascetic religion, a teaching on gradual liberation from the passions, on the means and conditions of gradual acquisition of virtues, conditions both internal, that is, personal struggle, and external, that is, dogmatic tenets and grace-filled Mysteries, all having one purpose: to heal human sinfulness and lead us to perfection.**

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Titles and comments in square brackets were added by the translators.