

Defining Orthodoxy: *Is It Possible?*

Edward Moore

St. Elias School of Orthodox Theology

What does it mean to be an Orthodox Christian? This is, at first glance, an easy question to answer. To be Orthodox means to be a baptized member of the canonical Orthodox Church; to believe in the Creeds and doctrines comprising Holy Tradition; to participate in the liturgical and communal life of the Church; and to obey the commandments of Christ recorded in the New Testament and explained in the works of the Church Fathers.

But if we qualify on all these points, can we really claim to have a "correct opinion" (*orthos doxa*) regarding the foundation of our being, our salvation, and our relationship to the deity? Let us consider for a moment the meaning of the Greek construction *orthos doxa*, and how that formulation was likely understood by the most inspired and intelligent among the Church Fathers.

First, let us consider *orthos*. One of the earliest meanings of this term was "standing straight up, upright." It could also mean "to move in a straight line" or, metaphorically of a king or statesman, "to direct the state successfully."^[2] In other words, it implied something or someone requiring no support; - a thick, solid pillar, or a wise and judicious king would have been described by this term.

Later on, among early Christians, *orthos* was understood as describing the orientation of the Christian who, armed only with his faith and the grace of God, pursued a life of virtue, in the hope of attaining ultimate salvation. Finally, when Christianity was met with the inevitable philosophical questions and oppositions regarding its faith, *orthos* was understood as that which is "correct" and "true." However, this did not imply a loss of that sense of self-reliance, of an intellect engaged with God and therefore requiring no external support.

A perfect example of this attitude is to be found in Origen of Alexandria, who boldly speculated on all facets of the Christian faith and sought a philosophical or metaphysical foundation upon which to explain that faith. His later condemnation as a heretic is nothing less than a testimony to the intellectual torpor and ethical laxity of those who urged and facilitated his condemnation.^[3] Now let us turn to *doxa*, normally translated as "opinion" or "belief," giving us the working definition of an Orthodox Christian as *one who holds the correct belief* about God and salvation. Indeed, as early as Homer and Herodotus, this term indicated "what one thinks, opinion."^[4] However, according to Plato, opinion "is *in between* understanding and ignorance" [*epistasthai and amathia*].^[5] Since it occupies such a position, it is easily swayed, and cannot be said to stand on its own.^[6] In other words, opinion or belief (*doxa*) can never stand in an upright and correct manner (*orthos*) since it is inherently indeterminate, swaying always between understanding and ignorance.

However, we must not forget the other meaning of *doxa*, which appears in the New Testament, Philo of Alexandria, and elsewhere - i.e., *doxa* as "glory, radiance, majesty," etc.^[7] Of course, this glory is the glory of God, toward whom we ideally *move in a straight line* (*orthos*), requiring no external support or crutch - only our faith and the grace of God that is at work in our lives. Now this may seem like a very Protestant sentiment, insofar as it emphasizes the unique and unmediated experience of divinity by the individual. Yet is this not the same experience that the early Christians shared, and which they passed on, through Holy Tradition, to the Church Fathers? Indeed it is. And, like the eponymous rhapsode of Plato's *Ion*, we must be prepared to answer the question of whether we truly understand the divine, or are merely capable of saying edifying things about it.^[8]

As Orthodox Christians, we must ask ourselves if our relation to Tradition is not akin to Ion's relationship with the poetry of Homer. That is, are we simply giving a beautiful and satisfying rendition of the doctrine(s) of the Fathers, or are we really embodying the spirit of their intimate engagement with God? Are we allowing the Tradition of the Fathers to mediate our engagement with God, or are we prepared to go so far as to discard certain aspects of our Tradition, if doing so provides us with a purer understanding and experience of God?

We must keep in mind that *discarding* certain aspects of our Tradition is not the same as *condemning* those aspects. When Origen's doctrines were rejected, it was not with an understanding of their important role in the development of Christian doctrine; rather, his contribution was treated as though it would have been better if he had never been. On the contrary, when I call for the discarding of certain aspects of our Tradition, I do so only on the basis of my conviction that certain doctrines have outlived their usefulness for the Church.

Allow me to give a concrete example of such a doctrine. The Church has long held that the primary purpose of marriage is procreation.^[9] According to Maximus Confessor (a thinker deeply influenced by Neoplatonism) the separation of the sexes into male and female was the result of the Fall,^[10] and so he taught a doctrine of soteriological hermaphroditism that we tolerate as part and parcel of his intellectual heritage, yet tacitly condemn - I would hope - as a symptom of a certain neurosis peculiar to his age. However, what is often forgotten - at least among the majority of Orthodox laity and non-scholarly clergy - is that this great Father of the Church held biological procreation in rather low esteem, sensing, as he did, the possibility of a more spiritual proliferation of the race.^[11] The negative side to this attitude is that it left little place for erotic love between man and woman as an instrument of divine transcendence. But the positive side is considerable, and has practical implications for the present day.

For example, while many so-called Christians of our era would not consider this globe of ours to be over-populated, an empirical evaluation of our present situation, coupled with an ontological evaluation of our quality of life and that of our fellow existents, forces us to admit our obtrusion upon one another in a most unwelcome and stifling manner: traffic jams; packed restaurants; impossible supermarkets; dead animals on the side of the road, killed by automobiles; pollution; wanton consumerism; teenagers committing murder; infants worshipped by their parents as idols due to their supposed 'innocence' and superficial 'likeness' to their biological progenitors - all this has contributed to the degradation of the human person as the image of God. From the most 'mundane' examples of our outmoded obsession with procreation, to the most severe, we can recognize the rejection of our innate tendency to serve as our own support in this world - i.e., a denial of the possibility of orthos or self-sufficiency, insofar as we rely upon what John D. Zizioulas has termed the "biological hypostasis," as opposed to the "ecclesial hypostasis" of interpersonal communion.^[12] In the former case, we are called upon to recognize in our procreative drive a demand of the body to be self-repeating, an impulse that is really a denial of the self-positing nature of the person. The latter, the "ecclesial hypostasis," demands of us a recognition of a reality that *exceeds* us. The failure to come to terms with this reality is due to a selfish desire to live in both worlds: the spiritual and the fleshly.

If this recognition of our own inherent selfishness is reflected upon carefully, and reacted against, we may be able to rehabilitate Orthodoxy, not in terms of leaning upon an 'upright tradition,' but rather by serving as *one's own* tradition or religion - *religio* understood as "scrupulous attention, respect, patience, even modesty, shame or piety."^[13] Emmanuel Levinas has adequately and succinctly expressed what I consider the fundamental attitude of authentic Orthodoxy:

One has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other. My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun', my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man

whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?^[14]

What Levinas is affirming here is the ethical realization that existence is a privilege, not a right. No one has a right to life, for no one is causally responsible for his or her own being-in-the-world. Existence is a gift granted to the individual by the deity; it is not an ontological 'given' that we are free to deal with on our own terms. Moreover, we must understand that, in so many ways, our existence is detrimental to others. The space that I occupy is space that could easily belong to another, whether human, animal, or plant. Once we understand that *guilt* is the determining factor of our being-in-the-world, then we are capable of defining Orthodoxy clearly and articulately.

I believe that an accurate definition of *ortho-dox* is "single-minded devotion to the divine glory open to us as human beings." Yet we must recognize that this glory (*doxa*) does not offer us a license to overrun the world in the name of our Lord and Savior. Rather, we must follow His lead and act as servants to all of creation, stewards of nature, caretakers of a world for which we are not causally responsible, yet have inherited as children of *God*, the greatest caretaker of all.

Such a 'right and proper' (*orthos*) attitude is only possible at the level of the individual, the *person*. As Nicolas Berdyaev has explained, the personality of the individual does not come to fruition in the objective community or society, but only by itself, on its own terms. For the psyche of the human being is self-constitutive, creative, and - while all-too-easily conformable to the norms and dictates of society - maintains always a capacity for unique engagement with the world, independently of the structured, objective relations of 'culture' or society.

The Orthodox Church, understood as a worldly community of believers in a certain set of largely unquestioned creeds or dogmas, is not the locus of the truly *ortho-dox* person. The one who is truly Orthodox stands on his/her own, ready for the full experience of God's glory, yet also ready for the ethical demands placed upon him/her as a unique and unrepeatable entity dwelling in the world. As soon as the institutional Church becomes a burden for such an individual, we must realize that it is the Church that is in the wrong, and not the individual. For, as Berdyaev has explained, institutions - including the Church - exist as objects, and are unable to embody *personality* - or the unique, free and unrepeatable existence of the human being - in a meaningful manner.

Personality as an existential centre, presupposes capacity to feel suffering and joy. Nothing in the object world, nation or state or society, or social institution, or church, possesses this capacity. They speak of the sufferings of the masses of the people in an allegorical sense. No communities in the object world can be recognized as personality. Collective realities are real values, but not real personalities, their existentiality refers to the realities of personalities. One can allow the existence of collective souls, but not of collective personalities.^[15]

This is a most instructive insight for understanding how the Church should function in the life of the person.

The Church embodies the collective values of the persons comprising it, and in this sense we must understand the Church as the product of a collectivity of unique persons uniting in their devotion to God. Yet this devotion, while collectively expressed, is nevertheless always the multiplicitous devotion of unique, unrepeatable persons, with a private, inner life and experience that must always remain distinct from the body of the Church, if it is to remain a living and active force in the lives of persons. As Berdyaev goes on to explain, the "social aspect of religion distorts the spirit, subordinates the infinite to the finite, makes the relative absolute, and leads away from the sources of revelation, from living spiritual experience."^[16] For this reason, the Church, although understood as the future communal existence of deified souls, is, in our present mode of existence, an objective expression of a

future hope - an expression that falls short of the anticipated reality. For once deification has occurred, there will no longer be any objectivity opposed to the personality of the unique human being. Rather, all will be harmonious and connected through a spiritual kinship of humanity and divinity - such is the faith and hope of the Christian. However, for the time being, the community of the Church is necessarily unsatisfying for the self-reflective, self-aware individual seeking to establish a firm personality in the world.

We must not - indeed the Church must not! - consider this hyper- or para-ecclesial development of the personality a bad thing. On the contrary, the Church must recognise that *theosis* is achievable outside the confines of the institutional Church, and it must learn from and actively encourage such moments of transcendence. For as Berdyaev so rightly states, in my view, the institutional Church is part of the "object world" and cannot make any claims upon the spiritual orientation of personality. He goes on to affirm this independence of the personality from the institutional Church as being a prerequisite of deification.

The freedom and independence of human personality from the world of objects is its divine-humanity. This means that personality is not formulated by the world of objects but by subjectivity, in which is hidden the power of the image of God. Human personality is theandric existence. Theologians will reply in alarm that Jesus Christ alone was God-man, and that man is a created being and cannot be God-man. But this way of arguing remains within the confines of theological rationalism. Granted man is not God-man in the sense in which Christ is God-man, the unique One; yet there is a divine element in man. There are, so to speak, two natures in him. ... Personality must be God-human, whereas society must be human^[17]

This by no means denies the responsibility of the person for the created realm in which he finds himself. Rather, it places a far greater burden upon him than the ethical dictates of the institutional Church. For whereas in the Church we are judged according to a now static tradition bearing little connection with the state of the world in the present day, when we exist as a personality, free unto our self, the full burden of our ethical responsibility toward all existents bears down upon us, and we feel the whole world resting on our shoulders. And this is as it should be. Indeed, such a weight invites a shrug, but unlike Ayn Rand's Atlas, the authentic Orthodox Christian doesn't shrug, but carries the cross of the cosmos - *through Calvary to the priesthood of the good things to come.*^[18]