



# Marriage in Orthodox Theology: the roles of dogma, holy tradition and Gregory Palamas

H.E. the Most Reverend Archbishop Damaskinos (Papandreou)  
Archdiocese of Johannesburg and Pretoria  
Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa

and

Rev. Prof. Angelo Nicolaides  
Graduate School of Business Leadership  
University of South Africa  
[nicola@unisa.ac.za](mailto:nicola@unisa.ac.za)

## Abstract

Dogmas are essentially an expression of Divine Revelation and guide us back onto the 'right path' in the event of our straying from communion with God the Father. It is clear that if one is not on the 'right path' or follows the 'wrong way', he can never arrive at his ultimate destination. This article briefly unpacks Orthodox dogma, holy tradition and the role of the church. It also considers the role of St. Gregory Palamas since Orthodox theologians would generally agree today that patristic tradition finds its fulfilment in the theology of St. Gregory Palamas who became Archbishop of Thessalonica and who formulated Trinitarian theology in terms of the distinction in God between the transcendent Essence, the three *hypostaseis* and the uncreated energies. The Eastern Orthodox Church has not departed from Holy Scripture or from its original doctrinal principles. It has sought to remain unwavering in upholding the Truth and has not allowed itself to generate into a theological circus. It has thus adhered to dogma and allows genuine Holy Gospel social principles to be formulated.

**Keywords:** Dogma, holy tradition, holy fathers, Eastern Orthodox, Palamas.

The dogma of the Eastern Orthodox Church is the result of carefully made decisions at the Ecumenical Councils on all the issues of the faith. A dogma by its very nature draws distinct boundaries between truth and erroneous thought. It expresses the revealed truth and as such creates the life of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Vlachos 1994:26). Dogmas are essentially an expression of Divine Revelation and guide us back onto the 'right path' in the event of our straying from communion with God the Father. It is clear that if one is not on the 'right path' or follows the 'wrong way', he can never arrive at his ultimate destination. Dogma is thus a therapeutic necessity (Trembelas, 1968). The Early Church Fathers teach us that man is an 'ill' man in dire need of the divine cures as offered by the Triune Godhead. Many 'revisionist' theologians speak about marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy as vague notions taken out of their New Testament contexts. They become an amorphous conglomeration of ideas that are extremely vague and at variance with each other. They become concepts of 'obscure theological pursuit' (Photii, 1994:17).

The person who understands Eastern Orthodox theology is the person who lives in compliance with its doctrines. It is an epistemological basis of the New Testament that: "He who loves God knows God" (1 John 4: 7-8). The true believer knows God with a knowledge far greater than intellectual knowledge. It is rather a knowledge in which man, created after God, takes an active part. Thus, it is only theologians in the existential analysis of the word, who live in Christ through the Holy Spirit who are 'true' theologians and they would not tamper with any issues of the faith (Trembelas, 1968).



We should therefore honour the Mystery of Marriage as it is a foundational divine institution. We must also view its related aspects of spirituality, sexuality and celibacy in a unique way. We need to discover whether or not the Holy Bible considers all human beings as belonging to one unique class. Clearly the whole of humanity is a distinct species (Genesis 1-11). It is in these same verses of Genesis that events occur that forever change what it means to be human. What was the impact of the fall on humanity? As a consequence of the development of sin, humanity begins to lose its status as a unified class of creatures. The nations of the world are scattered and Israel emerges as the focal point by divine grace. What makes Israel unique is that God speaks to them in the Old Testament in a special way, through numerous individuals:

Has any people ever heard the voice of God speaking of fire, as you have heard and lived? ... To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him". (Deuteronomy 4:35-35)

What is therefore recorded in the Old Testament is still rooted in Israel's' own special account of revelation. What the Israelites did then is judged as comprehensible only in the context of the Old Testament. It is this record which distinguishes Israel as God's elect. God's truth on issues of life is made manifest to them:

He declares his word to Jacob his statues and his ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances, Praise the Lord. (Psalm 147)

The Old Testament thus sees humanity in two distinct categories. The first is fallen and outside God's special relationship. The second is fallen but marked with the potential for knowing God's will and how to obey his statutes and ordinances. We cannot truly hope to know God or ourselves by appeal to our essential nature, emotions or sexual urges. What we know of God is learned through the witness of Israel, the Prophets and Apostles, and the generations of Saints and Holy Fathers who have faithfully passed on to us what they have learned. Their testimonies are enshrined in Holy Scripture which teaches that humanity is fallen and unable to set itself right without the Grace of God. The holy sacrifice of Christ aided by the Holy Spirit atoned us to the Father.

Humankind has only received a small foretaste of God's righteous fellowship. This has been evidenced by the witness of Israel and especially in the personage of Jesus Christ. We therefore still take part in the fall of Adam. We are all sinners but justified by God. It is not surprising therefore we err in the way we use Holy Scripture and in how we hear its plain sense according the Holy Spirit's testimony. Theologians who therefore twist the Dogma and Canon of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Holy Scriptures, are akin to Satan tempting Jesus (Trembelas, 1968). Satan did not tempt Jesus in a simple way, but rather used Scriptural quotations to make his standpoint. In Matthew 4:5-7, Jesus Christ appeals Satan's statements for rebuttal. Various 'revisionist' theologians corrupt Scripture so as to satisfy self-serving personal glory. The way that they err in attempting to re-work and re-interpret the writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church is indicative of the power of sin amongst those who purport to be Christians.

Holy Scripture is more than sufficient to guide the Church. Nothing taught apart from Holy Scripture should be enforced by the Church. One cannot simply alter the Christian conscience by, for example, asserting that sexual relationships outside of marriage are congruent with God's will. One cannot alter the fact that Paul tells us that the human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and as such should be used for the glorification of God.



How do we proceed to discover the right path that leads to Orthodox spirituality, sexuality and perfect marriage? Orthodoxy is a living tradition whose path is to be found in the church – assuming a course that we do not view the Church as only a system of complex abstract theological and philosophical concepts. It is also not only a collection of administrative functions but a unique theology which in essence reflects deep-rooted spirituality.

### **The Church as an “Infirmary” for “ill” Christians**

The parable of the Good Samaritan as found in Luke chapter 10, provides us with a major clue as to the nature of Orthodox spirituality. We see the Church as a panacea for the curing of all the ills afflicting the human condition:

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him; 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again I will repay you'. (Luke 10: 33-35)

The Samaritan represents Jesus Christ who cured the wounded man and took him to an inn. The 'inn' is the 'hospital' which for us is the Holy Church. Christ is the divine healer, the "physician of our souls and bodies" (Divine Liturgy). Saint John Chrysostom in his analysis of the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' expresses the opinion as laid out above.

Man lived comfortably in Paradise but became a victim of the evil. He allowed himself to fall amongst thieves just as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The 'wounds' that plague the injured man are the sins that he perpetuates. These 'wounds' have the potential to wreak havoc in an individual's life. David tells us in Psalm 37, that: "my wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness."

Every sin that we commit in our daily living, in our marriages, in our sexuality and in the spiritual realm, inflicts a severe wound and bruise. It is only through Jesus Christ who descended from heaven to 'cure' our 'wounds', that we find salvation for our sad condition. The 'Good Samaritan' used oil and wine to affect a 'cure' for the wounds of the victim. In the name of Jesus Christ mingled His blood with the Holy Spirit to bring us back to life.

The 'inn' to which Christ takes us, is His Holy, Catholic; and Apostolic Orthodox Church. Christ hands us over to the 'inn keeper' who is the Apostle Paul. Paul in turn hands us down to bishops and priests. Saint Chrysostom tells us that Paul was handed the Gentile people to care for as they were 'wounded' by sine and were thus 'ill' and in need of cure. His teachings of the Prophets and the Holy Gospels are the remedy for the afflicted. According to Saint Chrysostom it is Paul who maintains God's Church: "curing all people by his spiritual admonitions and offering to each one of them what they really need". (Chrysostom: Homily IV, on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans:356).

In Saint John Chrysostom's interpretation, therefore, the Church is a 'hospital' which cures all who are 'afflicted' by sin. The clergy in the Church could thus be likened to 'hospital staff' who aid the 'afflicted' and who put them on the road to recovery. It is the theologians like Saint Gregory Palamas who are:

... the God-seers; those who have followed the "method" of the Church and have attained to perfect faith, to the illumination of nous and to theosis (divinisation). Theology is the fruit of man's cure and the path which leads to cure and the acquisition of the knowledge of God. (Vlachos 1994:25)



To be in living contact with Orthodox Spirituality, one must make a great personal effort and struggle to: "put off concerning the former conversion of the old man" (Ephesians 4:22). In dealing with a spouse, an Orthodox believer must mind prayerfully towards the ultimate: "mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ" (Colossians 2:2). It is vital not to concentrate on the traditions of man and after the "rudiments of this world" but focus solely on Christ (Colossians 2:8).

### **Holy Tradition and the Holy Fathers**

A fundamental and essential characteristic of the Orthodox Church is its steady adherence to Holy Tradition which it inherits from the early Catholic Church (Rinvolutri, 1966). Many New Age Movement or 'revisionist' theologians who purport to be orthodox, as well as many non-Orthodox theologians call the Eastern Orthodox Church a "petrified mummy" (Bratsiotis 1931:24). However, not adhering to Holy Tradition is fraught with many dangers. It may result in injudicious innovations which can negatively affect the very essence of Christian faith. (Evdokimov, 1959).

Once Holy Tradition is accepted as a source of faith it is vital to recognise its immutability in exactly the same that the Holy bible is immutable. One must clarify that in Orthodoxy tradition is a dynamic and not a static factor as is supposed by many non-orthodox denominations.

Being loyal to Holy Tradition does not only involve one in a slavish attachment to the past and external authority, but rather becomes a living connection with entire history and experience of the Church. (Florovsky 1951:55). Holy Tradition is regarded in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the 'Word of God', as 'water springing up into everlasting life' (John 4:14). The Church may have remained somewhat static but is certainly not 'petrified' – it is alive and life giving (Evdokimov, 1959).

The Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church is the continual action of the Holy Spirit in the Church. It is the 'living presence' of the Church that allows each member of the church to hear, perceive and know the Truth. This knowledge is made possible by the *Paraclete* (Comforter/Holy Spirit). "*No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit*" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Holy Tradition that is true is not simply an actual verbal handing-down of doctrine; dogma, rules, rites and ordinances. It is also an invisible actual passing down of Grace and sanctification.

God's message for humanity was delivered orally by our Lord Jesus Christ to the Apostles. They handed the message on orally to their successors (1 Clement xlii). The 'teaching' of all nations as commanded by Jesus (Matthew 28:19), was mainly carried out by verbal preaching. The importance of Holy Tradition to the Apostles and especially Paul is also well known: '...keep the ordinances as I delivered them to you' (Corinthians 11:2), "Stand fast and hold the traditions" (11 Thessalonians 2:15). If one ignores Holy Tradition they are cursed: "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:9); "and the things that thou has heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also" (11 Timothy 2:2): "... but continue thou in the things which thou has learned and have been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them" (11 Timothy 3:4).

It is safe to assert that the Eastern Orthodox Church has kept intact the fundamental principles and the main characteristics, as well as the 'great and priceless treasure of Holy Tradition, of the early Church' (Bratsiotis 1931:32).



In Holy Tradition, there are two overlapping sections, one of which is the rites, rules and regulation (doctrines) passed down to us by Jesus Christ via the Apostles and Holy Fathers. The second section is the presence of the *Paraclete* (Comforter) or Holy Spirit in every word of God's revelation of the Truth. It is the Holy Spirit who allows us to hear the Word as well as "the silence whereof the Word comes" (St. Ignatios, Homily II, 1937:198). The core of Orthodox spirituality as a living tradition is the Holy Spirit and the Grace which He pours out to believers. The Grace poured out is commensurate with the efforts that individuals put into growing in their spiritual lives. Believers need to turn their faith unto deeds.

St Macarios the Great tells us that the Grace of the Holy Spirit:

... continually abides, becomes rooted, and acts like leaven in man ..... And this Dweller in man becomes a natural thing, something indispensable, as though of one essence with him. (Mason, 1921).

A believer can come into contact with Orthodox spirituality through the faith of the Holy Scriptures which holds firmly both to: "the witness of the Apostles and the theological testimony of the Holy Fathers" (Photii 1967:6). Patristic theology is a spiritual exposition of the Creed which is the Symbol of Faith as well as the experience of Orthodox spirituality which is filled with God's Grace. The dogmas as postulated by the Holy Fathers of the Church are the same as those delivered by the Apostles of Jesus Christ.

The Apostolic witness is according to St. Irenaeus:

... preserved not only in the Church, but it resides there as an increasing depository which is a fruit of the ever-increasing depository of the Apostolic witness... (de Catanzaro 1980:248)

The Mystery of Orthodox Marriage has been terribly misunderstood by Orthodox 'revisionist' thinking, especially in the West. The influences of Roman Catholic and Protestant theology have blurred the true significance of Marriage as a sacrament. It is a Mystery which transforms each individual, both body and soul-so that after marriage the couple is spiritually invigorated and embrace a new life together as servants of God.

The Orthodox stance on marriage has been fixed by a long patristic tradition and Church position. Celibacy is also regarded as a personal spiritual discipline. To be married according to Christ's teachings and celibacy for Christ's sake are two very unique spiritual paths. Both marriage and celibacy are however valid for a true living of the content of Christian faith.

If a couple is not prepared to live as true Orthodox Christians for the duration of their lives, they will find themselves in dire straits:

He that is not with Me is against me: and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth. When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. (Luke 11:23-25)

Orthodox adherents are free to follow either married life or a life of celibacy – each is blessed equally by the Church. The choice lies with each individual who makes himself responsible for the consequences of his own spiritual warfare.



If Orthodox Christians lightly dismiss their responsibilities towards God as married or single people, they are inviting true spiritual disaster upon themselves as well as their families. For this reason, the decision by an individual to be married should only be made after a period of serious preparation and study.

Saint Ignatios once wrote that those striving for the Truth:

...must seek out the will of God in Scripture for themselves ... With weeping and heartfelt groaning implore God not to allow you to turn aside from this all-holy will and follow a fallen human will, your own or that of your neighbour – your [spiritual] adviser. (Bishop Ignatios 1982:48)

The Holy Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church have always been servants of the Hypostatic Word. Their theology is by its very nature exegetical and to an extent existential. They tended to theologise however in an Apostolic manner rather than in an Aristotelian mode. That is why their theology is an 'epistle' in the sense that it reveals Apostolic witness. Its ultimate objective is to testify through word and deed to the Mystery of God who lives. Theology and its spirituality is thus a means to an end which portrays the Truth as revealed by God. It is a path we take to follow if we seek to encounter Orthodox spirituality as a living tradition.

Believers need to listen to the dictates of conscience and continue to seek the Truth elsewhere. God has given us a conscience to protect us from the chicanery of others and from ourselves (Lossky, 1957).

If the situation in which believers find themselves in issues of marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy is seen to violate God's Laws, they are obliged to act in accordance with the Truth, no matter what it may take to do so.

"The Holy Fathers teach that natural and metaphysical categories do not exist but speak rather of the created and uncreated. Never did the Holy Fathers accept Aristotle's metaphysics" (Vlachos 1994:32). The greatness of all the Mysteries of the Eastern Orthodox Church comes from God. As there are many people and not just one, we need our sacred society to grow. This is obtained through marriage. It is a means by which the soul of a Christian can ascend from the dark pit of sin to the glory and height of God's Kingdom.

Eastern Orthodox Christians describe the life of faith as a journey (Lossky, 1957). It is not a falling back into our essential self but a leaning ahead into God's promises for humanity. We need self-control and discipline in our lives, whether married or single, so that the promises of God are not wasted. The fact that we have two sexes arises out of the abundance of Divine love, *agape*, and the mystery of the unity of the creative God who:

... from the communion of this own being, establishes communion with man as a condition for human community. The words of the Creator; 'It is not good that man should be alone' (Genesis 2:18), make an analogy of God's incomprehensible being in three Persons the principle of human existence. The Trinitarian God does not create one 'I' from the 'I' of God, but- man and woman – out of which the 'we' of the human race can grow. (Nissiotis 1966: 52)

This is essentially why man can only be defined as being - in communion in the Church. The *Ekklesia* is the centre of creation (Florovsky, 1972). Paul clarifies the relationship between husband and wife by referring to the relationship between Jesus Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:25-33). God's image is reflected as the rejection of the self-sufficiency of man. All individual men and women are enabled by their free wills to make personal choices in a



deep sense of interdependency (1 Corinthians 7:4). The Holy Spirit establishes full communion between the divine Persons and the Church as a unifying principle. He works as a Comforter (*Paraclete*), regenerator and organiser. He unites men and women in the Body of Christ and makes them new creatures (Galatians 3:5). On this basis, the Holy Fathers of the Church clearly distinguish the incomprehensible essence of God (*ousia*), which is identical in the Triune Godhead and the principle of their oneness, from the energies (*energeia*) which are also incomprehensible, but which can be communicated to humanity via the Holy Spirit. The work of the *Paraclete* demonstrates to us that He can bring into total unity the three divine Persons of the Triune Godhead so that God's Grace can be communicated to humanity, recreating it as the Body of Christ. The Holy Fathers speak of *hypostasis*. This word describes the internal cohesion of the Three who are One by virtue of their divine essence which is identical in all three. (Rinvoluceri, 1966).

In creating man in His image, God implanted in humanity love which is the very essence of the Creator. All theologians should try to interpret Biblical revelation of man's nature from creation, to the fall, to restoration and regeneration by the Triune Godhead. Sinful man is continuously transfigured through repentance in the Holy Spirit. God offers Himself to man directly through His Word, His Spirit and His Son, and as such brings to Himself His creation. To be renewed in Jesus Christ is to be renewed: "...in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Colossians 3:10). Human life cannot exist apart from God as it is God works in man through the Holy Spirit. Man does not raise himself up but God humiliates Himself in order to reach down to man and to make him a receptacle of divine life in Jesus Christ. It is this life in Christ (*en Christo*) that is the essence of the Holy Bible (Lossky, 1957).

St. Symeon the New Theologian teaches that deified man obtains the revelation of God. Once obtained, man's experience of God is based on a faith which has therapeutic benefits. Man is thus able to be led to *theosis* - divinisation through the energy of the divine Grace. God co-operates with man, since it is God who operates and man who co-operates with Him (de Catanzaro 1980:113).

Man is made up of body and soul. These two aspects distinguish the material and spiritual elements of the human condition. Both terms are used metaphorically. The 'flesh' denotes man's inclination to sin, while the 'spirit' suggests an ethical means of obtaining God's Grace. The word (*pneuma*) spirit refers to man's higher relationship with God in His Spirit. The Spirit becomes a third element in human nature and operates from outside man. If the spiritual and material are radically separated then man does not have a body, but is a body:

Man is 'bodily' a spiritual being and is 'spiritually' a material being ... Man is the type of the whole of creation ... God sanctifies the material nature in the human body. (Nissiotis 1964:88)

Individuals should not therefore embrace the vagueries of sexual desiring, for if they do, they are claiming a nature that God does not intend for us. The marriage of man and woman, with its potential for creating life and manifesting love, mirrors the love of God Himself. In the realm of human sexuality, this is what it means for Christians to confess that in Christ, God reconciles the world to Himself. We need to bear what God says about marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy. He has certainly not changed His moral standards to suit the agendas of New Age Movement or 'revisionist' theologians. God created us as sexual creatures and we must endeavour to discover the path He intends for us in our married life, our spirituality, our sexuality and in our desire to be celibate if we so elect. God tells us that, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). Men and women need to seek God's purpose in the spiritual and sexual areas of their lives, whether married or celibate.



The heavy accent on revelation can remain very strong if theologians realise that they are working under limitations and need to enter into dialogue with all others who conduct the intense study of the things of God which is guided by the Holy Bible as well as Holy Tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church (Lossky, 1957). All those charged with theological responsibility should be greatly concerned about the connection between life-style and the ultimate products of their labours. The churches of God need to take many factors into consideration and although diversity is not always bad per se, God's word must always be the benchmark. No deviations from the Truth are acceptable.

Theologians would do well to emulate Patriarch Athanasios I of Constantinople (1289-1293, 1303-1309) who was strong willed, determined and austere while remaining empathetic and compassionate, devoted, even uncompromising. He was totally committed to the welfare of the Church and his people. A contemporary historian Pachymeres described him as: "tougher than beans which do not soften even in boiling water" (Lambakis, 2004 quoting Pachymeres, II, 519:1879).

Theologians whose intellectual training is limited will find it difficult to grasp the high points of theological abstractions and will not fully comprehend what the Holy Bible, dogma, doctrine and Holy Tradition have to say about marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy (Athanasios, Letters, No. 111, 1974:124).

### **The Importance of Gregory Palamas in Orthodox Theology**

Orthodox theologians would generally agree today that patristic tradition finds its fulfilment in the theology of St. Gregory Palamas who became Archbishop of Thessalonica and who formulated Trinitarian theology in terms of the distinction in God between the transcendent Essence, the three hypostaseis and the uncreated energies. Following the tradition of St. Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysios, Palamas saw Divine Essence as absolutely incommunicable to creatures and the experience of God's otherness, of His transcendence, as an essential and positive aspect of the vision given to the saints: "In spiritual vision itself the transcendent essence of God and the uncreated energies appear the more completely hidden" (Meyendorff 1973:461). God is totally transcendent and unknowable in His essence, but reveals and communicates Himself in His energies.

Palamas, a theologian and philosopher of the fourteenth century, devoted his entire life to expounding the Truth as he comprehended it based on defence of the tradition of the Holy Fathers and the biblical interpretation of God the Father (Papademetriou 1973:79). The Holy Scriptures and patristic eastern doctrinal development flavoured his theology. He was also to a far lesser extent influenced by Classical Greek philosophical ideas. Palamas clearly comprehended the Biblical doctrine of God in terms of energy and essence, the essence of which is beyond the scope of man's knowledge and understanding, while the energy being the presence of God's glory in His created cosmos. Palamas made great use of characters portrayed in the Holy Bible to support his position on the authority of Scriptures. Moses is used to show that God revealed to Moses his "Being, existence and glory, but not His essence, and that this revelation to Moses was without intermediaries, such as angels, but rather came as direct experience of God's glory and presence" (Scazzoso 1970:82). Palamas was hypercritical of all who exalted philosophy above Holy Scripture. He accused them of misunderstanding the true doctrine of God (Chrestou, Triad III, 2:12). According to Palamas, those who use Scripture only as proof texts and do not see it as a living relationship with God's Spirit are akin to pagans. Nothing can or should attempt to usurp the ultimate authority of Holy Scripture which is infallible. He rejected the Aristotelian philosophy of God as he believed that the rational approach alone cannot arrive at the knowledge of God's unknowability and total transcendence. He did however embrace Aristotelian language and methodology.



Palamas believed that man's mind is not outside of man, neither is it devoid of emotion. The human mind (*nous*) functions best in relation to the heart. It is thus able to attain ultimate knowledge of God's will and guides us on the path to perfection. The Holy Fathers, like Palamas, insisted that God is beyond all human and logical categories and in His essence transcends knowledge and comprehension. Palamas stated that humans who are a constituent of the physical world reflect divine reality. Humans point to an eternal Being which has created them and rules them. God is the one principle (*arche*) of all created things (*ktismata*). Palamas expands the view that the God of the Holy Scriptures is a true and all-powerful Creator.

The idea which underlies Gregory's teaching on Divinity may be expressed as the assertion at one and the same time of God's totally unapproachable, transcendental, and "extra universal" nature and of His self-revelation to an immanent and real presence in the world. (Krivocheine 1938:17)

Palamas's theology of God's revelation to humanity is that God is an immediate presence who reveals Himself to His people and who sustains them in a personal way. All rational people are in communion with the personal God because we are created "in His image" from the beginning. It is the "image" which gives man freedom to do as he pleases. The fall however shows how man has abused his God-given freedom which was intended to keep him obedient to the will of God. The participation of man in divine energy is *theosis* by which he would "fulfil his purpose by attaining immortality and entering God's glorious presence" (Chrestou, Triad I, 3:36).

Palamas describes the Divine Nature as being tri-hypostatic, and the energy manifests itself always personally: "From the Father through the Son in the Spirit" (Prestige 1952:258). In God's manifestation and revelation to creatures, it is not an impersonal God, a divine Essence, which is revealed through the energies, but the Triune Godhead in its *perichorisis* (co-inherence), that is in their eternal mutual existence. This 'mutuality' and co-inherence is so complete and transcendently perfect that the Three Persons are indeed One God.

Since God in His wholeness is wholly incarnate, He has "unchangeably united to the whole of mankind the divine nature and all its power and energy in one of the divine hypostases. Thus also, through each of His energies on shares in the whole of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Chrestou 1970:373). There is no way of understanding human personhood without referring it to its divine model. Through Marriage the free union of spouses is sanctified by the granting of Divine Grace, that the marriage can attain its purpose as a Mystery. God's love, according to Palamas, is to be seen in His "image". While man's love is the "image" that connects him to God, God's love is complete. "The highest human love that comes close to God's love for man is the conjugal love of husband and wife" (Patsavos, 1978 quoting Oikonomou 1857:207).

An ethical life is a pre-requisite for man to receive God's Divine illumination. Palamas as a great theologian: "... enthroned the supreme authority of Scripture in its rightful place as authority for all true theologising" (Papademetriou 1973 :24).

The Mystery of Marriage, as a true sacrament, depends ultimately on a doctrinal orientation of the devotional life. It loses its essence when pious living is dissociated from dogma. All sacraments in the Orthodox Church are part of dogma or established theological viewpoints based entirely on the Holy Scriptures. The mystery of the Orthodox Church is precisely in that Christ lives and abides in believers and they, via faith, live and abide in Him (Harkianakis, (1997). To 'follow' Christ implies a mystical identification of all Church members with the Head, Jesus Christ. The mystery of marriage is related to the mystery of the Church.



The privilege of becoming members of the Bride of Christ, the Church, and participating in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in heaven, belongs to all who accept His pardon: "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!" (Revelation 19: 7-9). God is vitally concerned about the life of His Church and the spiritual struggles of believers. He will ultimately judge humanity and we should therefore seek his will.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: For this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good, or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14)

God's unfolding purpose is that His will and nature will be reflected in a perfected humanity in which evil will be annihilated and good will reign supreme. Honours and rewards will be given to those who follow the commands of Christ with regard to life and how to conduct oneself whether married or celibate. The choices one makes will determine one's destiny in eternity. God commands us to live upright lives and obey the Grace and law of Christ in our hearts. Grace is the only thing that enables Orthodox believers to live an obedient life. The goal of Orthodox life is the divinisation of man. Man must however rise above what 'revisionist' theologians state concerning marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy, and, while being tolerant of diverse viewpoints, realise that Orthodoxy is the historical Church of Christ from which all other Christians have derived their beliefs and confessions.

### **The Permanence of Traditional Orthodoxy**

The traditional and distinctive mask of the Eastern Orthodox Church is here to stay. Why do we need to go anywhere else other than God's word to see what place is given there to marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy? God has "not left you without some clue to His nature" (Acts 14:17). Paul states that: "a false god has no existence in the real world" (1 Corinthians 8:4).

The Holy Father of the Eastern Orthodox Church respected the wisdom of antiquity. Gregory Nazianzus said that a number of philosophers like Aristotle and Plato had even "caught a glimpse of the Holy Spirit" (Orat. 31.5). He saw "the Lord of God guiding men to the true God". This type of patristic thought can be summed up in the words of Irenaeus: "there is only one God, who from beginning to end, through various economies, comes to the help of mankind" (Irenaeus, Adv.Haereses. III, 12.13). Concerning matters relating to life there is not enough reading of the Holy Fathers and far too little patristic elucidation. One must of necessity turn to the Fathers and to all the souls that: "are closer to heaven than our own" (Yannaras 1972:200). We need to create a patristic synthesis that truly expresses the Orthodox ethos and spirit and that reveals a cleaner knowledge of what Orthodox believers stand for. It is my intention to offer greater insights gleaned from my own readings on the Orthodox Churches' standpoint on marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy. What is their function within the Orthodox Church and are they priorities of the Church?

### **Concerning Marriage**

The Sacrament of Marriage occupies a very prominent position in the conscience of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In fact, "the whole meaning of the Church is realised in the Sacraments, the Church being, at the same time, the fullness of the Body of Christ and members in particular" (Cabasilas 1972:38). With regard to marriage it is imperative to regain a certain spiritual perspective which many 'revisionist' and New Age Movement theologians appear to have lost. We can argue, along with Saint Basil, that the ecclesiological formulae by which we circumscribe the boundaries of the Church itself are bound up in the fullness of human life within the Mysteries. In many Western Christian Churches, marriage and its related



issues can constitute self-standing sub-area of theological discourse. This is anathema to the Eastern Orthodox Church, as is clearly evidenced by the patristic witness. It has a unique spiritual wholeness with regard to marriage and its related issues within the dogma of the Church, based on Holy Tradition and the evidence of the Holy Scriptures. Orthodox believers find not only the fullness (*pleroma*), of the Faith in their unity with one another, in the early realm, but in Communion with the Church. The faith of an Orthodox Christian married couple is perfected fully in the eucharist which constitutes the *raison d'être* of the believers who gather in a Church.

We must reflect very carefully on the role that the Mystery of Marriage plays in the spiritual life of the Eastern Orthodox Church. I will attempt to offer comments and reactions formed within such a reflective context. As spiritual life is utilitarian it aims at something beyond. No aspect of life in the Church can be understood adequately without a reference to this spiritual aim. Any presentation on Orthodox views that fails to adequately capture this aim is simply inadequate and has only a peripheral connection with the ultimate Truth.

Many 'Orthodox' writers are apparently captivated by a spirit that runs crosscurrent to the real ethos of their own faith. If we wish to share our faith with others who confess Christ and who embrace the spiritual world we need to vehemently and vigorously combat intellectual immaturity or we will simply distort the Orthodox faith and what it represents (Harkianakis, 1997). One cannot simply separate canons from theology and theological speculation from spiritual life. To do so demonstrates misreading and lack of intellectual acumen. It is the entire patristic witness which establishes Orthodoxy as the *Kriterion* of Christianity. It is the absolute truth from which all relative truths are derived and it is the essence from which Christian energies will flow and have flown. It is basically a standard against which any authentic confession of Jesus Christ has to be measured.

Orthodox spirituality, encompassing the mysteries was succinctly expressed by Saint Seraphim of Sarov as a means of "acquiring the Holy Spirit". All other Christian practices are also necessary but are primarily a "means to an end" (Florovsky 1972:114).

The purpose of all of spiritual life – encompassing the mysteries – is that it filters into "...the whole of human existence ... by the Divine Presence" (Florovsky 1972:119). The functions of marriage and celibacy can only be understood in reference to this aim of the Orthodox believer's spiritual life. Marriage enlightens a couple and enhances the activation of the spiritual mind (*nous*), as Saint Palamas states "...it becomes an integral part of the ascent towards spiritual transformation for each spouse right here on earth and it leads us to participate in the divine ..." (Chrestou, Triad I, 4:57). It is in marriage that we begin a process by which God wishes not to make us Christians alone. Baptism and then marriage introduce us into a life of transformation which takes place in the Church and through and for the community (*Koinonia*) of believers.

Man has obtained, or rather, regained his freedom through the power of his transformation in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. This is a continuous process which extends well beyond the power of human moral efforts. It is not man who accomplishes it but God. It does however require an act of free will by man to receive redemption from the Triune Godhead. Man's greatness is thus his continual building up of his freedom in the Holy Spirit. This is so that from being an individual, he may truly become a person in which God's grace functions and which allows itself to be used as a channel of grace to others.

Man's nature is therefore to be found not only in God and His incarnation, but also in his incarnate image in a husband and wife. Jesus becomes for a couple the life and means to achieve it in the Spirit. A true understanding of marriage is not possible unless we realise that a couple is recreated in communion through the energies of the Holy Spirit. A couple should



never forget their united life as members of the Church. Bearing the Holy Spirit is not a state of bliss. Neither is it a sublime tranquillity. What it does mean is that Jesus Christ incognito is in our daily life, in the depths of the heart of each spouse. "He reveals and re-creates the true husband and wife" (St. John Chrysostom, De precatone, I, XLIX, 776).

Husband and wife are part of the household of Christ and: "...fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise of God in Christ" (Ephesians 3:6). If the spouses are inspired by love, and place it before everything else in their relationship, any existing dissensions are immediately diminished. The redemptive work of Christ at sundry times and in diverse ways saves us through the grace of the Holy Spirit. He builds and fosters the life of a couple and at every moment provides new vision, new ways of life and new activity, so that His will can be done in all things. For Saint John Chrysostom sees marriage as a great mystery which involves the greatest form of love. He views it as a communion of life that man cannot do without. It is thus a mystery of chastity and cleanliness which allows a couple to live a virtuous life. But marriage and sexuality go hand-in-hand in bonding a couple spiritually and physically.

A couple seeking to adapt their life together to traditional Orthodox standards must always remember that this standard is based on the teachings found in Holy Scripture. Each spouse must subdue the self in favour of the family unit.

Saint Paul had a deep-rooted understanding of the great influence of family life on the life of the Church. This influence can be traced back to the special relationship which God created for a husband and a wife. The two distinct egos are surrendered as a new single identity is created which is far greater than the sum of the two parts which constitute it. Saint John Chrysostom explains:

The love of husband and wife is a force that welds society together. Men will take up arms and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of this love ... Because when harmony prevails the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbours, friends and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both for families and states, are thus produced. When it is otherwise, however, everything is thrown into confusion and turned upside down.

(St. John Chrysostom, On Marriage:44)

The Mystery of Marriage, according to the Eastern Orthodox Church is a union of two people, man and woman, in love. Their love can be transformed by the sacramental grace of the Holy Spirit into an everlasting bond which is not broken even by the death of one spouse. The dogmas, doctrines and teachings of the Church in connection with marriage are 'cast in concrete' in order to preserve and fully protect the basic meaning of marriage and its related aspects of spirituality and sexuality. Without the rules and disciplines in place, marriage is more likely to fall into sin. It is of course undesirable and unnecessary to strictly apply rules and disciplines for marriage which are based on purely legal and social ideas of the past. Only rules and disciplines which have a permanence in terms of spiritual value or theological value are to be strictly applied.

The 'Mystery' of God's Kingdom as revealed in marriage, is not merely a set of legal codes. A mature couple soon realise what is moral and allowed in their relationship. They also realise what is undesirable and objectionable in terms of spiritual and sexual weakness. God's Word is clear:

Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled. (Hebrews 13:4)

A spirituality which deviates from what God expects of us, adultery fornication and sexual excess are all undesirable. Celibacy is however viewed as a state: 'above nature', a special



gift from God bestowed on a few. Thus, "not all men receive it, but they to whom it is given. He who is able to receive this call, let him receive it" (Matthew 19:10-12). While a special Grace is received in marriage, celibacy also has a special place and Grace of its own

Orthodoxy believes that the metamorphosis of the world cannot be achieved through commandments which man does not have it in his power to keep. It is God's taking upon Himself and transforming the sinful nature of man which saves man. This implies that if a person believes in changing and believes it to be worthwhile, he must have faith in God who by the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes such things attainable.

Saint John Chrysostom calls Marriage a "Mystery of love" (John Chrysostomos PG. 51: 30). It is a great Mystery as the two unique individuals become a unique unity and are able to transform their sinful natures far easier as the one spouse guides and directs the other (John Chrysostomos, EPE:342, Discourse on Colossians, 1B,).

When we marry as Orthodox Christians we agree to submit our lives to God and to our spouses. Everything we have becomes communal. The Church favours Marriages in Community of Property as opposed to Ante-Nuptial contracts. As a Mystery, Marriage is not simply a legal contract that can be broken when one or other spouse feels it is no longer personally profitable or convenient. Sadly, modern society preaches that people should look out for themselves first and foremost, and force all those who enter our lives, husbands, wives, children and even God, to take second place behind self-fulfilment. 'Revisionist' theologians and the New Age Movement have made many Orthodox believers feel a sense of inferiority about the Orthodox theological scheme, leading to self-denigration and an almost obsequious attention to unwarranted criticism of Orthodox Holy Traditions. It is necessary to point out to Orthodox believers that they need not feel vulnerable or feel they need to defend their faith when it is attacked for its views on marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy or any other views it holds. To reach out and touch the heterodox religious world with love is a perfect response. We need to pray, labour intensely in marriage or as single people and purify our inner and outer lives even more so that God's image is more obvious to fellow Christians and non-Christians. In Orthodoxy's doctrine and moral teaching the prophetic tradition of the Apostles and the early Church lives on. Heterodox or Orthodox 'Revisionist' theologians and intellectuals who believe that Orthodoxy's social message for its people is outdated in today's world are very far from the truth. Orthodoxy has a very strong social character, and modern man needs her message.

The message it has is the message of Orthodoxy and it is not a message of Christianity in general. It is a message which emanates from the roots of the early Church and which says a great deal about marriage, spirituality, sexuality and celibacy.

## **Conclusion**

The Eastern Orthodox Church has not departed from Holy Scripture or from its original doctrinal principles. It has remained steadfast in upholding the Truth and has not allowed itself to generate into a theological circus. It has adhered to dogma and allows genuine Holy Gospel social principles to be formulated. These are based on the doctrine of the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are also based on the doctrine of the Church as the family of God and on Orthodox teachings about the last days. These are all expressed faithfully and consistently in the Holy Tradition of the moral lessons of the Holy Gospel which I will investigate in the course of this thesis.

The lives and acts of Orthodox Christians are always the measure of their faith. How we act in marriage or as celibate people, our spiritual and sexual attitudes, are not judged by the measure of theoretical faith, but by the measure of moral action. It is this moral action which



expresses the things believed theoretically. These are the basic principles of the Eastern Orthodox Church and it is in these principles that one discovers her social character. The Church has a justifying and sanctifying Divine Grace which it administers to the people by means of the all the Holy Mysteries, and especially Marriage, which is a divinely instituted Sacrament that delivers invisible Grace by visible means.

Thus, Marriage when worthily received becomes an instrument or means of transmission of Divine Grace. Through the action of the Sacraments, God's salvific power completes in man the process of sanctification. This is accomplished in all couples who are truly faithful by the Grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

## References

Athanasios, (1974). Letters, No. 111, 124.

Bratsiotis, P (1931). *Authority and Liberty in Orthodox Theology*. Athens

Cabasilas, N (1991). *The Life in Christ*. New York : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press

Chrestou, P. (1983). *The Mystery of Man*. Thessaloniki, Greece

Chrysostom (St. John) PG 57, Homily IV, on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans:356. P Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completes sense Graeca Parisiis*

Chrysostom, (St. John) De precatone, I, XLIX, J.P Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completes sense Graeca Parisiis* 1857-1866, 776,

Chrysostom, (St. John) PG 51. De Verbis illis Apostoli 1 Cor. 7. P Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completes sense Graeca Parisiis*.

De Catanzaro, C. J. (1980). Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses, (Classics of Western Spirituality), New York:Paulist Press, 240-248

EPE (Hellenic Fathers of the Church) 342, John Chrysostomos, Discourse on Colossians, 1B.

Evdokimov, P (1959). *L'Orthodoxie*. Neuchâtel : Oelachaux

Florovsky, G. (1951). *Ways of Worship*. London: SCM Press Ltd

Florovsky, G. (1972). *Bible, church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*. Belmont: MA.

Harkianakis, S. (1997). Dogma and Authority in the Church. *Phrenomena* 12. Sydney

Ignatios, (1965). To Polycarp. *Apostolike Diakonia tes Ekklesias tes Ellados*, Vol. II. Athens

Ignatios, St. Homily II, 1937:198

Ignatius of Antioch, ANF, 1 To Polycarp, 5

Irenaeus Adv. Haereses, 111,12- 13, MPG 7:437-1224

J.P Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completes sense Graeca Parisiis* 1857-1866



Krivocheine, B 1986. *In the Light of Christ : Saint Symeon the New Theologian*. New York : SVS Press

Lambakis, S. (2004). (Λαμπάκης, Στυλιανός). Γεώργιος Παχυμέρης. Πρωτέκδικος και Δικαιοφύλαξ. Εισαγωγικό Δοκίμιο (Αθήνα: ΙΒΕ/ΕΙΕ, 2004) Κέντρο Βυζαντινών Ερευνών: Μονογραφίες, 5.

Lossky, V. (1957). *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, London.

Meyendorff, J 1973/4. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*. New York : St. Vladimir's Siminary Press

Nissiotis, N.N. (1966). The Unity of Scripture and Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox Contribution to the Prolegomena of Hermeneutics, by *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. XI, No. 2 [Winter 1965-66].

Papademetriou, G. (1973). *Introduction to Saint Gregory Palamas*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Patsavos, L. J. (1978). 'Konstantinos Oikonomos of the Oikonomoi. In *Post-Byzantine Ecclesiastical Personalities*, edited by Nomikos Michael Vaporis., Brookline, MA, 69-85.

Photii, (Bishop) (1994). *Orthodox Spirituality. A Living Tradition*. Volume XII, Number 2 [Translated from the Bulgarian] Sofia, 1-7. Available online at <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/orthspir.pdf> [Accessed 24/011/2017]

Rinvolucri, M. (1966). *Anatomy of a Church. Greek Orthodoxy Today*, London, 1966.

Scazzoso, P. (1968). *Ricerche sulla struttura del linguaggio dello Pseudo-Dionigi Areopagita*. (Vol. B. Z. 6l [1968] 397.

Trembelas, P.N. (1968). *Dogmatique de l'Église Orthodoxe Catholique*, 3 Vols, Chevetogne.

Vlachos, Bishop Hierotheos, (1994). *Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers*. Lavadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery.

Yannaras, C. (1972). *Theology in Present Day Greece*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly, 16. Massachusetts.