

Empirical Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church According to the spoken teaching of Fr. John Romanides, Vol 1 by Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos

Chapter 2. Ethics

In all philosophical and religious systems, apart from the theories, there is also the practical application of these theories. This is called ethics, and concerns the basic principles determining human life and societies.

Since the Fall of man and the loss of communion with God, man is dominated by the passions, since his nous is darkened. Everyone pursues his individual security and dominance. Since everyone in society wants to dominate, some limits have to be set to ensure equilibrium. In addition, philosophical and religious systems establish certain preconditions to enable people to achieve their aims. This is how ethics evolved.

Many people maintain that this also applies in Christianity. They refer to Christian ethics. Things are not so simple. In the Orthodox Church ethics means something clearly different and does not resemble the ethical teaching of the various anthropocentric systems.

a) Philosophical, Religious and Social Ethics

Every philosophy also has its ethics. Classical examples are the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, who attempted through their ethics to apply their philosophical theories. We see that to this day.

There is also ethics as a branch of philosophy, which has no connection at all with Orthodox theology.

"If you look at it from the point of view of philosophical ethics, there are many good people who live correctly but have nothing to do with Christianity. There are many good people who are not even Christians, who are not interested in purification, illumination and glorification, not interested in being good people. Someone who goes through purification and illumination is not simply a good human being. He is something far beyond that."

During the period of the Enlightenment the foundations of metaphysics were shattered, as no one can assert that the Platonic ideas exist. As a consequence, the foundations of philosophical ethics, which were based on philosophical ideas, were also shattered. "After the destruction of the metaphysical foundations, a sort of moralistic teaching remained."

Science has proved nowadays that immutable criteria do not exist, contrary to what metaphysics used to say. As a consequence philosophical ethics also collapsed. Thus the ethical teaching that one way or another ought to exist has no foundations, no firm bases. So every human being or every society creates their own ethics.

"In recent years the belief that an immutable criterion exists has been utterly condemned. Thus the old metaphysical foundations of the law are no longer acceptable in Europe and America. Positivism prevails today in the Anglo-Saxon world. And in Europe the only philosophy in existence today is existentialism.

Existentialism rejects the idea of the immutable essence that could be a moral or legal rule. So we have this curious phenomenon whereby, although there is no unchanging criterion for law or ethics, everybody is invited to invent some aim for himself in life and to make every effort to reach that goal. Everyone determines something for himself from the ethical, legal and social point of view, and is asked to act altruistically and heroically, living the life of a good human being."

This also happens in religious systems. There are people involved in Eastern philosophy, Hindus, who are good people from the ethical standpoint.

"There are Hindus who are extremely good people from the ethical point of view, decent people, nothing more. Also, it (meditation) brings them relief, psychological relief. It is beneficial to them, calms them down. They are not acquisitive. They become sincere. A good human being, a good citizen."

Muslims, even atheists who believe in no God at all, can have excellent outward conduct and lead ethical lives. This sort of ethics does not save man.

"What fruit will Christians of different Confessions have in common? The only fruit they will have in common is ethics. But this ethical order will not only be shared by two Christians. A Muslim and a Christian may also share it. Because there are Muslims who are very good and honest people.

There are situations in which you can trust certain Muslims more than you can trust certain Orthodox, from the point of view of their ethical level. You can have a Muslim friend who always tells you the truth, and an Orthodox friend who continually tells you lies. Which of the two is morally better? The one who tells lies or the one who tells the truth?

There are atheists who in their ethical life surpass many Christians. On the other hand, there are Christians, who cannot be compared with that atheist. There are a large number of atheist idealists, just as there are Christian idealists.

If ethics is the criteria for ethical life, and we separate dogma from ethics, we end up saying that these people will go to Hell because they are not Orthodox in dogma. But look how ethical they are! As they are ethical, why should they not go to Paradise as well? Is it only the ethical Orthodox who will go to Paradise? Do ethical heretics, people of other religions and atheists not go too, as they are ethical? If ethics is the criteria, this creates a problem concerning who will go to Paradise and who will not go to Paradise."

There is also pharisaic type of ethics, when people perform all the outward actions - fasting, self-control - but their inner world is un-transformed.

"There are people who are highly ethical, at the very height of morality, who may have mortified themselves with fasts and so on, but they have a terrible, pharisaic nous."

This pharisaic approach to ethics was condemned by Christ, as we see in the corresponding parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. What is needed is not an outwardly ethical life, which degenerates into moralizing, but repentance as man's cure.

"Someone who is concerned with ethics may do everything laid down by the law and still have a hardened conscience. Instead of taking the path of the tax collector he may take the path of the Pharisee."

It is not only ethics that is needed, but something more than ethics. Repentance is also necessary. And repentance does not simply mean going to the confessor to tell him what I have done, which sins I have committed. It is not just that. Repentance means going through repentance, to progress from purification to illumination. If I do not arrive at illumination, I am not ready to see the glory of God."

This is the reason why Orthodox theology does not restrict itself to philosophical, religious and social ethics. It is not possible for man's destiny to be limited to ethics.

"Nowadays they identify the experience of theology with ethics. Yes, but theology is not ethics. The experience of theology is noetic prayer and glorification, not ethics. Orthodox theology does not have ethics, it has asceticism. Orthodox ethics does not exist. There is pagan ethics, which is not virtue and is not part of Orthodoxy, but belongs to the whole world. The experience of theology is not virtue, ethics, because ethics also belongs to the philosophers. That is why I emphasized the other day that it also belonged to the ancients."

Other humanistic and sociological movements also have ethics, such as communism, which promises equality and shared ownership, and has better ethics than capitalism. Even the atheism of communism is no different from the atheism of religions, even of some Christians. Because when someone does not have personal knowledge of God and does not know God, he actually believes in a non-existent God, the god of his imagination.

"Do the communists not have virtue? Do they not have ethics? Of course they have virtue, and of course they have ethics. Today the communists often have far superior ethics on many issues to the capitalists. This is a fact. Their own perceptions are superior to those of the capitalists on many subjects. Here too we should face the facts."

So, we do not like it, because they are atheists. I agree that we should be severe with them on the subject of atheism, but where they do something good, we cannot be hard on them. That is the reality. But as I have stressed, how are they different from the Orthodox even in their atheism? I have stressed that too. Because the reason they are atheists is exactly the same reason why Orthodoxy used to maintain until today or yesterday or the day before, that the gods of the other religions do not exist. Why?

Read any communist book you like. You will see there very well developed arguments why the gods of the various religions do not exist.

There in their argumentation, however, the God of Orthodoxy is not included. Why? Because they do not know the God of Orthodoxy. Because the Orthodox do not believe in God for the same reasons that the others believe in their fantasies."

Unfortunately even in Greece Orthodoxy has become associated with an 'ethical religion'.

"Contemporary Orthodoxy in Greece has become identified with an ethical system. Philosophy is also very much liked for that reason. Because the most philosophy could possibly do is to give us certain systems of ethics, be they Platonic or Stoic or whatever.

When the Greek Revolution took place, the fathers of the nation, led by Adamantios Korais, decided to abolish Orthodoxy as an ascetic religion, as it had been until then, and to make it an 'ethical religion', which would be good for the middle class, the Paris bourgeoisie, and help the police to make good citizens. That was what happened."

The problem, therefore, is not simply ethics, which is to be found in other religious, philosophical and social systems, but asceticism, which leads to true theology and is inspired by it. The essential points of difference between ethics and asceticism will be set out in a later section.

b) Christian Ethics

Like all philosophical and religious systems, Christianity, which was revealed by Christ, has its own practical application of the truths of the faith. The word 'Christian' is used for all the Confessions. The Orthodox Church safeguards the revealed truth, so it is regarded as the historic Church. It is the Orthodox Catholic Church, whereas the other Christian Confessions have diversified in dogma and ethics.

Whereas in Orthodox teaching, as we shall see below, what is called ethics is actually asceticism, in the other Confessions, ethics has become a matter of external moralistic teaching. Reference is made to Christian ethics. Western Christian metaphysics was based on Aristotle, who spoke about virtues. Thus in the West Christian ethics developed, which is complete different from what exists in the Orthodox Church and what we find in Holy Scripture and the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

"The Frankish theologians had followed Aristotle so closely that Aristotle's teaching about virtues became the ethics of the Papal Church, and subsequently of many Protestant traditions. Orthodox ascetic teaching was abolished among the Franks and replaced by moralistic teaching, by ethics. So the work of divine grace is continuously to help man to become virtuous, to acquire the virtues, as these were taught by the classical Greek philosophers.

This is why the chair of dogmatics and ethics was established at the University of Athens. The same professor who taught dogmatics was obliged to teach ethics as well.

Why? Because Thomas Aquinas, the greatest dogmatist of the Western tradition of all the centuries, teaches both dogmatics and ethics in the Summa Theologica. It is ethics and moralistic teaching that have now been repudiated by the whole of Europe. Modern people nowadays cannot accept this ethical teaching from any Western theologian or philosopher. Why? Because all the foundations of ethics have been demolished. That is why there are hippies in Europe and America."

This moralistic teaching affected not only Western monasticism but the entire Christian life.

"In the Frankish tradition, for instance, someone who was a prostitute can never become a nun. This is a curious irregularity. Perhaps someone ought to do a thesis to see the theological context of this difference between our traditions."

"In the Western tradition there is a great deal of moralistic teaching, because they have been very much influenced by the classical Greek philosophers. The evil demons of scholastic philosophy are the ancient Greek philosophers. And because they were enticed by them, the poor Franks suffered terribly."

Naturally the same applies here as we mentioned earlier, that once metaphysics had collapsed in the West, during the Enlightenment, it was inevitable that the ethical teaching based on metaphysics would also collapse.

"In the Frankish tradition, metaphysics was the backbone of the knowledge of the truth, on the one hand, and of law and ethics, on the other. Ideas about truth, law and ethics were based on metaphysics."

"So when metaphysics was demolished, Christian ethics began to be demolished by the philosophers of the eighteenth century. The demolition was completed with the appearance of Darwin's theory of evolution. More recent astronomy, particularly from the beginning of this century, also destroyed metaphysics. No one who is serious accepts it."

The views of blessed Augustine played a significant role in shaping moralistic teaching and ethics in the West.

"In the Augustinian tradition sin appeared in an ethical form, whereas in the Fathers of the Church it takes the form of illness, and the eradication of sin takes the form of treatment. So we have sickness and cure."

Blessed Augustine did not know the Orthodox ascetic tradition as it is expressed by the noetic theology of the Fathers of the Church.

"Augustine has no idea about noetic prayer, the heart, the nous and so on. He has an ethical perception of man, with the difference that man cannot do good works without God's grace. This is a variation on the patristic teaching that only when man has noetic prayer and becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit can he do things correctly, because he has love that 'does not seek its own' and develops in unselfish love, and as a

consequence he does his works well. That is why the works of the Pharisee are unacceptable to God, because they are ethical works. They are not works that come from unselfishness."

In the Orthodox Church, Christian ethics, as encountered in Western theology, does not exist. The Fathers of the Church were spiritual physicians, who cured human beings. They write from a medical perspective.

"Spiritual fathers are doctors. They are not moralistic fathers whose role is to uphold people's ethics on behalf of the Greek Government, so that we may have better Greek citizens. This is not the aim of Orthodox spiritual life.

That is why I emphasize to students that there is no Orthodox ethics and Christian ethics does not exist for us. The fact that we established chairs of Christian ethics is a proof of how far we had strayed from Orthodoxy."

At some period in history Western Christian ethics was brought to Greece as well and replaced Orthodox ascetic teaching. This secularized form of ethics was taught in the past in Theological Schools.

"With the modern Greek theology in the University of Athens, which those professors who had studied in Russia and Germany knew - they were the most highly educated theologians, they knew better than those illiterates - what did they teach us in their role as professors? Christian ethics and a theology without purification, illumination and glorification. What did they put in place of purification, illumination and glorification? Purification became deliverance from moral failings, from the ethical point of view."

"With the foundation of the Greek state and the war against the monasteries and monks, against monasticism in general, a subject called 'Christian ethics' was introduced for the first time into Orthodox theology.

Christian ethics does not exist. In Orthodox theology there is ascetic teaching, which concerns therapeutic treatment. It is not ethics in the sense of philosophical ethics, which dominated the Franks for so many centuries and later the Russians as well. There is nothing of the sort, that you are good or bad: if you are a good boy you will go to Heaven, but if you are a bad boy you will go to Hell. This sort of approach does not exist in the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

What does exist? There is ascetic teaching, the science of therapeutic treatment, in order that man's noetic faculty (energy) may be cured and differentiated from his rational faculty, that a faculty may function within man, which has remained inactive, or has been occupied with activities inappropriate to man's destiny."

c) Orthodox Ethics as Ascetic Teaching

In contrast to Western Christianity, there is no mention in the Fathers of the Church of autonomous ethical or moralistic teaching connected with an outward improvement in life. They mainly refer to asceticism.

First and foremost, as we have mentioned, what is referred to as ethics is linked with dogmatics. It does not depend on philosophical and metaphysical ideas but on revealed truths.

"It is plainly obvious here that, from the point of view of anthropological structure, there is a particular perception of the function of the human personality that is certainly similar in character to ethics, but instead of being ethical it is ascetical."

Reading the patristic texts we clearly discern that the Fathers of the Church did not accept ethics, as the term is understood today. When they used this term in what are called their ethical writings, they were actually referring to ascetic teaching. They assigned great importance to man's nous, which is distinct from his rational faculty and is the eye of the soul.

"The Fathers do not accept ethics. Ethics does not exist in the Fathers of the Church. I do not mean that the Fathers teach unethical behavior, but what we call ethics nowadays is called ascetic teaching by the Fathers."

Well, for the Fathers of the Church there are two kinds of people. There are those whose nous is darkened and, because their nous is darkened, they have the appearance of immoral people, those we call bad people today, unethical people. But the Fathers understand it as darkening of the nous. And there are those whose nous is illumined."

Ascetic teaching centers, therefore, on the illumined or darkened nous, and not simply on man's outward behavior.

"What is the purpose of asceticism? The purpose of asceticism is extremely simple. Read all the troparia, read the service of Baptism, read the Church's troparia for Holy Week, for the whole period from Easter up to Pentecost. Read all the liturgical books carefully. What is the aim? The aim is purification and illumination of the nous."

And something else. Christianity exists for the sole purpose of taking human beings through purification and leading them to illumination. Does Baptism have any other aim? This is the aim. There is no other aim."

Every system of ethics has different criteria for defining what is ethical and what is unethical. Something different happens in Orthodoxy.

"You cannot base an ethical system on the fact that one thing is ethical and another thing is unethical. It has nothing to do with ethics from that point of view. Orthodox ethics does not exist. Only ascetic teaching exists."

The criteria in the Orthodox tradition are ascetical. This justifies the sudden transformation of prostitutes and tax collectors. The service of Great and Holy Tuesday says of the woman who was a prostitute: "The woman who before was prodigal is suddenly seen to be chaste, hating the works of shameful sin." This is a change that takes place by the grace of God.

"There is a sense of history in our tradition, which is not based on ethical criteria but on ascetical criteria. Someone, who may be completely sunk in one sort of sin or another, all of a sudden changes and becomes a saint of the Church.

We have many examples of this in Orthodoxy. To see the difference here, look at the fact that in our Church a prostitute can become a nun, and is actually welcome to do so."

In any case, the Fall of man was not ethical but actual. It contributed to the corruption of the whole human being and even affected creation. The Fall is expressed as darkening of the nous and as deprivation "of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

"Many people nowadays understand the Fall as an ethical fall, whereas, when St Symeon the New Theologian speaks of falls he does not mean ethical falls, because St Symeon the New Theologian is not concerned with ethics.

St Symeon the New Theologian is an ascetic. He teaches asceticism not ethics. He thinks ascetically and not ethically. He means that people have now become bishops who do not have noetic prayer. That is what he means. So they are like the laypeople in earlier times, who did not yet have noetic prayer, who were newly baptised, but not yet illuminated."

St Symeon the New Theologian speaks about glorification, not about some kind of ethics.

"St Symeon the New Theologian says that, in order for someone to become a bishop, he must have made theology into experience. Now we read this and think that by making theology into experience he means that we become good children. Everyone who sees these words today equates the experience of theology with ethics. Yes, but this experience is not a matter of ethics. The experience of theology is noetic prayer and glorification, not ethics."

When St Symeon the New Theologian refers to the fact that the clergy have fallen, he is not simply thinking of moral transgressions, but means that they have perceptibly lost the grace of God.

"St Symeon the New Theologian does not mean that the priests and bishops have become unethical scoundrels with bad reputations..."

Thus ethics cannot be separated from the dogma of the Church and is purely ascetic. Christian ethics as it prevailed in the West is markedly different from ascetic teaching.

"None of the Fathers of the Church was a philosopher and their method of theology - noetic prayer and so on - was clearly opposed to rationalism. Ascetic teaching was not ethics. There is a great difference between ethics and asceticism. They are not the same thing. Ascetic training is therapeutic, whereas ethics does not help in any way.

Ethics leads to Hell in the end. I do not mean that someone should be immoral, not in that sense.

Orthodox ethics is ascetical; it is not based on philosophy. It has no connection with philosophical ethics. Nor with the religious ethics of Western Christians, scholastic or Protestant. It has nothing at all to do with that phenomenon. In Orthodoxy the worst human being can be cleansed and attain to illumination."

Ascetic training can never be converted into ethics, because it is based on treating the whole human personality. Orthodox asceticism bears some resemblance to the method of contemporary psychiatry, but its approach and purpose are different.

"Teaching subjects in a moralistic way is completely different from offering therapeutic treatment through the Orthodox tradition. That is why I have stressed for many years now that there is no Orthodox ethics, only ascetic teaching.

Orthodox ascetic teaching can very well be described as spiritual psychiatry, for the very simple reason that the energy of the nous or the heart, where the Holy Spirit prays, is a natural state for man. It is a natural part of the human personality, not something alien to it. Man has the natural ability to receive this prayer in the place of the heart."

Since man's aim is to attain to unselfish love after being delivered from self-love, the problem is not ethical but therapeutic.

"It is clear from Holy Scripture that the destination man has to reach is unselfish love. Is this problem an ethical or a therapeutic one? Will he get there by means of ethical asceticism or therapeutic asceticism?"

The problem is surely therapeutic not ethical, in the sense in which ethics is understood today.

In the Orthodox Church we do not find mere ethical systems, but a therapeutic method, setting out ways in which people are cured. These are not, of course, external means, but ways of co-operation between God and man, as grace acts and man collaborates.

We are referring to purification, illumination and glorification. This therapeutic journey will be analyzed elsewhere, but it will be briefly identified here, in order to define in a few words what we mean by asceticism. Asceticism is identical to the therapeutic method and the opposite of the Christian ethics that can be found in other Christian Confessions.

According to the Fathers, human beings are not categorized as 'ethical' and 'unethical', 'moral' and 'immoral', 'pious' and 'impious' according to anthropocentric and moralistic criteria.

"We continually encounter the problem that there are many people with pious intentions, who either act piously, or speak about piety and ethics, and divide people into 'good' and 'bad'.

In the Orthodox tradition humankind is not divided into good and bad, moral and immoral people. Such a thing is unheard of in the Orthodox Church. In the Orthodox Church there are stages of perfection. Not moral and immoral, good and bad."

Some people have changed Orthodoxy into an ethical system for the improvement and strengthening of society, which co-operates with the police for better social conditions.

"They tried to turn Orthodoxy into an ethical religion. That is the heart of the matter. They said that the work of the Church was to help preventively. The Church was Prometheus and the police Epimetheus. The Church would try to create good citizens and the police would sit and check if they really had become good citizens.

In this way an Orthodoxy was created which was very like the Orthodoxy in Russia, which can only stand with the help of the army and the police."

In general, dogma is connected with ethics and, to be precise, with human morals. The Orthodox Church does not simply have ethics, as can be seen in philosophical, religious and Western Christian systems.

It has ascetic teaching. Through Orthodox ascetic teaching, which is derived from Orthodox dogma and means purification and illumination, man experiences dogma. Dogma becomes experience and man attains to glorification. Orthodox asceticism is a collaboration between the human being and the uncreated energy of God.