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Using Therapeutic Sin-Talk in a (Post)Modern Environment: a Theologically Acceptable Choice or a Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Problem?

Abstract

A glimpse at Christian Orthodox writings published over the last twenty years illustrates that numerous Eastern Orthodox scholars acknowledge that, to a large extent, our present era is postmodern. Given that, one would expect that in its contact with broader society, the Orthodox Church would communicate in a contemporary language compatible with the basic tenets of postmodernism that would allow it to effectively carry out its mission in today's allegedly postmodern age. Yet this is hardly the case. Greatly motivated by the neopatristic movement and its call to return to the Church Fathers and



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renew Eastern Orthodoxy by grounding it on patristic sources, the Orthodox Church frequently uses pre-modern patristic language in the present day. That is particularly true for the therapeutic language various Orthodox clerics and hierarchs use to describe human sin. For them, just like for many prominent late antique patristic authors, sin is a sickness of the soul, and the Orthodox Church is the only institution capable of adequately curing this sickness. But is such a pre-modern patristic therapeutic sin-talk compatible with postmodernism and, hence, able to effectively communicate with the present era, which many Orthodox scholars consider postmodern? In this paper, I answer this question negatively, arguing that the Eastern Orthodox therapeutic language of human sin has difficulties effectively communicating with postmodernism because it clashes with pluralism, a fundamental characteristic of postmodernism.

Keywords

Postmodernism, Pluralism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Therapeutic Discourse, Sin

1 Introduction

Although it is debatable whether and to what extent postmodernism and its socio-political, cultural and philosophical ideas permeate and inform our present era,¹ many Eastern Orthodox scholars often describe the current period in

¹ See Alan Kirby, "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond," *Philosophy Now* 58/1 (2006), pp. 34-37; Davood T. Bazargani and Vahid N. Larsari, "Postmodernism: Is the Contemporary State of Affairs Correctly Described as Postmodern?", *Journal of Social Issues & Humanities* 3/1 (2015), pp. 89-96.

history as 'postmodern' and seek to understand its underlying currents and intellectually engage with them.² One could, consequently, say that on an academic level Eastern Orthodoxy is both aware of and has attempted to start a conversation with the intellectual movement widely known as post (or late) modernism.³ That, however, is not always reflected in the

² See, for instance, Thomas Hopko, "Orthodoxy in Post-Modern Pluralist Societies," *The Ecumenical Review* 51/4 (1999), pp. 364-371; Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004); Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Orthodoxy, Postmodernity, and Ecumenism: The Difference that Divine-Human Communion Makes," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42/4 (2007), pp. 527-546; Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "From the 'Return to the Fathers' to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54/1 (2010), pp. 24-29; Vasilios N. Makrides, "Orthodox Christianity, Modernity and Postmodernity: Overview, Analysis and Assessment," *Religion, State and Society* 40/3-4 (2012), pp. 248-285; Nikolaos Asproulis, "Is a Dialogue Between Orthodox Theology and (Post)modernity Possible?: The Case of the Russian and the Neo-Patristic 'Schools,'" *Communio Viatorum* 54/2 (2012), pp. 203-222; Christian Sonea, "The Orthodox Church and Postmodernity: Identity, Pluralism and Communion," *SUBBTO* 63/2 (2018), pp. 5-17; John A. McGuckin, *The Eastern Orthodox Church: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), esp. pp. 297-304.

³ In philosophical scholarship, there are, by and large, two main ways of understanding 'postmodernism.' On the one hand, philosophers like Jürgen Habermas and, to a certain extent Jean-François Lyotard see postmodernism as the highest state of modernity that completes modernity's unfinished project and can thus be called late-modernism. On the other hand, philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty see a discontinuity between modernity and the historical period that succeeded it. Hence, they prefer to use the term 'postmodernism' to refer to this period and its philosophical outlook. For a more detailed discussion of post and late modernism, see Louis Dupré, "Postmodernity or Late Modernity? Ambiguities in Richard Rorty's Thought," *The Review of Metaphysics* 47/2 (1993), pp. 277-295; Alina Sajed, "Late Modernity/Postmodernity" in: Nukhet A. Sandal (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), pp. 4787-4805.

Eastern Orthodox Church, especially in the language many of its priests and hierarchs use to describe human sin. More specifically, instead of carefully devising and using a contemporary sin-talk to help the Orthodox Church better communicate with today's allegedly postmodern age, numerous Orthodox priests and bishops tend to borrow their language of sin from the early patristic tradition, which commonly perceives sin therapeutically. They, then, in a way akin to that of prominent patristic figures who portrayed sin as spiritual sickness and the church as the institution capable of healing this sickness,⁴ describe sin with therapeutic terms, using thus a pre-modern patristic idiom in today's arguably postmodern era.

To mention only a few examples illustrating how the therapeutic language of human sin is currently used in Eastern Orthodoxy, I should first turn to the theological writings of His Eminence Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos, especially his magnum opus titled *Orthodox Psychotherapy*. In this book, after presenting the teachings of various Church Fathers, mainly the Philokalic Fathers, on the therapy of the human soul, Vlachos maintains that Eastern Orthodoxy, best represented by the Greek patristic tradition, regards sin as a spiritual illness and the Orthodox Church as the only "inn and hospital" capable of curing this illness.⁵ Moreover, based on this therapeutic and largely patristic understanding of human sin, Vlachos contends that, for the Eastern Orthodox Church and tradition, humanity is essentially divided into two kinds of people. First, those who neither accept nor practice the Orthodox Church's teachings and, therefore, are sinful and spiritually sick. Second, those who accept and practice the Orthodox Church's teachings and, therefore, are spiritually healthy or in the process of spiritual

⁴ See, for instance, Basil of Caesarea, *Sur le Saint-Esprit* (SC 17 bis), pp. 306-308; Gregory of Nyssa, *Antirrheticus Adversus Apollinarium*, ed. Friedrich Müller (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 3/1, pp. 196-197; John Chrysostom, *De Sacerdotio* (PG 48, 4.3), pp. 665-666.

⁵ Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos (Vlachos), *Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers*, trans. Esther Williams (Levadia: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2012), pp. 18, 32.

healing.⁶ Such a therapeutic conception of human sin and its subsequent division of humans into binary categories appear throughout Vlachos' book. Sin-related therapeutics, though, is not unique to Vlachos' writings. Therapeutic thought categories and language have also found their way into official documents of the Orthodox Church, which frequently describe human sin therapeutically. It is thus not surprising that the texts of the 2016 *Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church* define sin as a "spiritual sickness" and the Orthodox Church as the therapeutic institution capable of curing this sickness.⁷

But sin-related therapeutic thought categories and language are not exclusively found in Eastern Orthodox theological and ecclesiastical texts. These texts and their way of describing human sin very often exert a profound influence on Orthodox Church leaders, making them view reality through a therapeutic prism and use therapeutic sin-talk in their sermons and contacts with broader society. A case in point is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Cyril of Moscow, who used therapeutic sin-talk to justify Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in a sermon he delivered on March 6, 2022. In that sermon, Patriarch Cyril portrayed the teachings and values of the Orthodox Church as spiritual "life" and human sin as the sickly violation of "God's law" leading to spiritual death. He then explained that Gay Pride parades are deeply sinful as they celebrate sexual acts condemned by the Bible and the official teachings of the Orthodox Church. For this reason, he argued, Russia was essentially right to invade Ukraine because the Ukrainian State had been supporting Gay Pride parades and was thus treading on the sickly path of sin and spiritual death.⁸ For

⁶ Ibid., pp. 30-32.

⁷ *Logos Synodou: Ta Keimena tis Agias kai Megalis Synodou tis Orthodoxou Ekklesias Kriti 2016* [Official Documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church], ed. Konstantinos Delikostantis (Athens: Eptalofos Publications, 2017), p. 67.

⁸ "A Terrible Sermon: Patriarch of Moscow Blesses 'Metaphysical' War Against the 'World of Gay Prides,'" *Bitter Winter*, 03 July 2022,

Patriarch Cyril, therefore, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is, among other things, a mechanism of spiritual healing. To his mind, Russia, seeing the Ukrainian State supporting the sinful and spiritually unhealthy Gay Pride parades leading to spiritual death, invaded Ukraine to heal and restore this to a spiritually healthy life aligned with the Orthodox Church's life-giving teachings and values.

Those familiar with the modern history of Eastern Orthodoxy, especially with the still immensely influential twentieth-century neo-patristic movement that, among other things, seeks to perpetually renew Orthodox theology by anchoring it in the writings of the Church Fathers,⁹ can better understand why Patriarch Cyril and other Orthodox leaders often use therapeutic sin-talk in their theological texts and sermons. As mentioned earlier, this sin-talk commonly appears in patristic literature, so in their effort to achieve the neo-patristic goal of grounding Orthodox theology on patristic sources, many Orthodox leaders choose to use such sin-talk. For them, patristic sources uniquely preserve the authentic spirit of the early Christian tradition and deriving their theology, language and sin-talk from these sources constitutes an essential way of being faithful to this tradition. Therefore, the Eastern Orthodox tendency to use patristic therapeutic sin-talk in the world of today is not an accidental occurrence. It is instead the outcome of a sincere desire to stay true to the authentic tradition of early Christianity. More specifically, motivated by this desire, a large portion of contemporary Orthodox Church leaders choose to use patristic therapeutic sin-talk in their theological discourse believing that this is the way to connect themselves with the tradition of early Christianity and be authentically Christian. Is though such a choice acceptable from a Christian point of view? Therapeutic sin-talk has undoubtedly deep roots in the early Christian tradition. Apart from the

<<https://bitterwinter.org/patriarch-of-moscow-blesses-war-against-gay-prides/>> (accessed 29 August 2022).

⁹ Paul Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: Behold, I Make All Things New* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), pp. 95-122.

writings of many important Church Fathers, therapeutic sin-talk appears also in the Bible. We should not forget, for example, that in the Gospel according to Mark, even Jesus uses therapeutic sin-talk, saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."¹⁰ In the Christian tradition, however, we hardly find any mention that the language and sin-talk Jesus or the Church Fathers used in their socio-historical and philosophical context need to be used by all Christians at all times and circumstances. The contrary is rather the case, so in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul the Apostle highlights:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.¹¹

In light of this Pauline passage, one could easily argue that an essential task for Christians is to be willing to flexibly change and adjust their ways and language to communicate their faith in the best possible way in different times and contexts. Of course, if the language Christians use fulfils this task, there is no need for it to change. But is this the case with the pre-modern and largely patristic therapeutic language of human sin that the Orthodox Church and many of its leaders often use nowadays? Or to be more precise, if our current era is to a great extent postmodern, as numerous Eastern Orthodox scholars seem to acknowledge, then is the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk adequately compatible with postmodernism and thus able to effectively communicate with it? These are my paper's main research questions, and to answer them, I shall first provide an outline of postmodernism, focusing in particular on its philosophical support of pluralism.

¹⁰ Mk. 2.16-17.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 9.20-22.

Second, I will argue that the therapeutic sin-talk frequently used by many Orthodox has difficulties effectively communicating with postmodernism because it is at odds with pluralism, a fundamental characteristic of postmodernism.

2 Postmodernism and Eastern Orthodox Therapeutic Sin-Talk

To start with, and before explaining why therapeutic sin-talk is not the best language the Orthodox Church could use to communicate its faith in a postmodern environment, I wish to throw some light on postmodernism and its core tenets. Postmodernism is a primarily philosophical movement that initially appeared in the late twentieth century. Back then, having witnessed that in the name of “objective” truth, modern Western civilisation had “wrought dominance, oppression, and destruction,”¹² many philosophers who are nowadays classified as ‘postmodern’ and some of them we will discuss shortly, started to doubt and eventually reject truth’s objective authority. Their rationale was simple: since the idea of objective truth had led to terrible historical events like, for instance, the atrocities of the Second World War and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the refutation of truth’s objectivity was necessary to ensure that humanity would not experience similar events in the future.¹³ For postmodern philosophers, therefore, and postmodernism as a whole, the concept of truth, particularly objective truth, is of fundamental importance, and in fact, truth occupies such a prominent position in postmodernism that, according to Hilary Lawson, at its philosophical core, postmodernism is, first and foremost:

¹² Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Brisbane: Connor Court Publishing, 2004), p. 3.

¹³ Jeff Malpas, “Retrieving Truth: Modernism, Post-modernism and The Problem of Truth,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 75/2-3 (1992), pp. 287-289.

An attack on truth. It is an attack that originates (...) in a critique of the very possibility of objectivity. From a post-modern perspective the central characteristic of modernism, in a philosophical sense, is not that truth is assumed to have been attained, but that objective truth is assumed to be in principle attainable.¹⁴

In a nutshell, then, postmodernism reacts against the modernist assumption that objective truth is attainable and holds that such truth is beyond human reach and thus practically nonexistent. In this light, the whole concept of truth becomes highly subjective. It ceases to be what religion, faith, reason, or science dictates and becomes inseparably intertwined with the socially and historically conditioned “little narratives” people recount, hear and believe.¹⁵ So Jean-Francois Lyotard, the father of philosophical postmodernism,¹⁶ observes that “even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.”¹⁷ Hence, in postmodernism, truth depends on the socio-historical and linguistic contexts in which humans are born, raised, and socialised. For this reason, Zygmunt Bauman maintains that postmodernism does not speak of one truth but a “plurality of truths.”¹⁸ There are, in fact, as many truths as contexts that produce them, and this postmodern understanding

¹⁴ Hilary Lawson, “Stories About Stories,” in: Hilary Lawson and Lisa Appignanesi (eds.), *Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1989), p. xi.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 60-61.

¹⁶ Gary Aylesworth, “Postmodernism,” in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 05 February 2015, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/>> (accessed 29 August 2022).

¹⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, p. 15.

¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, “Philosophical Affinities of Postmodern Sociology,” *Sociological Review* 38/3 (1990), p. 430.

of truth provides a foundation for pluralism, a key characteristic of postmodernism.¹⁹ In particular, by rejecting the idea of objective truth and leaving us in this way without an ultimate criterion that “might tell us what is right and wrong in all cases,”²⁰ postmodernism fundamentally supports pluralism, broadly understood as the philosophical outlook that acknowledges the “existence of [an] ineliminable diversity and the impossibility of a final rational ranking of values, interests, or beliefs.”²¹ In a pluralist manner, therefore, postmodernism recognises that all human truths, interests, beliefs and values, however different they are from one another, are equally justified and valuable. That being the case, postmodernism prizes “heterogeneity,” respects different voices and perspectives and strives to “include the ‘other’ and make room for the ‘different.’”²²

But having sketched postmodernism and how this lends philosophical support to pluralism and the recognition that the diverse subjective truths humans believe in are equally valuable and should be respected, it becomes apparent that the therapeutic sin-talk used by many Orthodox Church leaders is at odds with postmodernism. That happens because this sin-talk essentially accepts what postmodernism rejects: the idea of a single, objective and exclusive truth. Indeed, although, for postmodernism, there is no such thing as a single humanly attainable objective truth, it seems that the belief in this kind of truth forms the basis on which the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk

¹⁹ Bazargani and Larsari, “Postmodernism: Is the Contemporary State of Affairs Correctly Described as Postmodern?”, pp. 90-91.

²⁰ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 10.

²¹ Carla Yumate, “Pluralism,” in: Michael T. Gibbons (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 5.

²² James K. A. Smith and Shane R. Cudney, “Postmodern Freedom and the Growth of Fundamentalism: Was the Grand Inquisitor Right?”, *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 25/1 (1996), pp. 37, 43.

rests. One can, of course, disagree with this, arguing that the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk is fundamentally a health-talk, not a truth-talk and thus has nothing to do with truth. This argument, however, does not hold up because if we bring the above-discussed cases of Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk to mind, we will realise that far from being a mere health-talk, the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk is an objective and exclusive truth claim formulated in medical language. When, for instance, Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos and Patriarch Cyril of Moscow assert, each in their own way, that only those who accept and practice the Orthodox Church's teachings are spiritually healthy whilst those who reject and do not practice these teachings are spiritually sick, they do not simply make assertions about people's spiritual health. Their language is undeniably medical, but if we look beneath its surface, we will see that, in essence, this language equates the Orthodox Church and its teachings with a singular, objective and exclusive truth. In particular, there seems to be one objective truth about people's spiritual health that the Orthodox Church possesses and that given, the Orthodox teachings are the only ones that point to the true way in which one can be spiritually healthy. Yet that being so, there is no room left for alternative spiritual health-truths because if the Orthodox teachings reveal the only true way to spiritual health, then all alternative ways of spiritual living are, to a lesser or greater extent, untrue and spiritually unhealthy. For this reason, Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) and Patriarch Cyril characterise those who reject and do not practice the Orthodox Church's teachings as spiritually 'sick' and not just healthy but in a way different from that of the Orthodox Church.

At this point, though, I should clarify that the idea of a single, objective, and exclusive truth does not underlie only the therapeutic sin-talk of Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) and Patriarch Cyril. The way these two Orthodox Church leaders use therapeutic sin-talk in their theological discourse explicitly shows that the belief in the existence of a single, objective and exclusive truth lies behind their therapeutic language of human sin. But the same is true for other, less explicit cases of Orthodox

therapeutic sin-talk, such as the therapeutic sin-talk one finds in the official texts of the 2016 *Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*. These texts, as noted above, define human sin as spiritual sickness and the Orthodox Church as the therapeutic institution capable of curing this sickness, so their sin-talk, compared to that of Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) and Patriarch Cyril, is more nuanced since it does not openly characterise as spiritually sick those who reject and do not practice the Orthodox Church's teachings. Yet despite their nuanced tone, the belief in a single, objective and exclusive truth equally informs these texts. Specifically, by defining human sin as spiritual sickness, they silently acknowledge that there is a single objective truth about people's spiritual health, determining who is spiritually healthy and who is not. Moreover, by describing the Orthodox Church as the therapeutic institution capable of curing people's spiritual sicknesses, they exclusively associate the Orthodox Church with the objective truth about people's spiritual health, hence implying that one cannot be genuinely spiritually healthy without accepting and practising the Orthodox Church's teachings.

It is, then, clear that there is a disagreement between postmodernism and the therapeutic sin-talk used by the Orthodox Church and many of its leaders. On the one hand, postmodernism, driven by its disbelief in the attainability of objective truth, ends up seeing humanity as the sum of individuals that embrace diverse yet equally justified and valuable subjective truths which need to be respected. On the other hand, the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk, driven by its belief that there is an objective truth about people's spiritual health contained in the Orthodox Church's teachings, ends up seeing humanity as the sum of spiritually healthy and unhealthy individuals. Those who embrace the Orthodox Church's teachings and the absolute health-truth these contain are seen as spiritually healthy (or in the process of spiritual healing). Yet those who do not embrace the Orthodox Church's teachings are seen as spiritually unhealthy and, in a rather disrespectful manner, the things they hold to be true are deemed untrue and spiritually sick if they disagree with the Orthodox teachings.

Therefore, for the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk, there is only one truth, and everything diverging from it is considered untrue and spiritually harmful. The roots, of course, of this exclusive understanding of truth, can be traced to the Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology, which generally understands the Orthodox Church's teachings and their truth to be objective, hence professing that "outside the Church, there is no salvation."²³ This ecclesiological explanation, however, further emphasises that the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk differs fundamentally from postmodernism and its pluralist understanding of truth, making it thus difficult for the former to effectively and unproblematically communicate with the latter.

3 Conclusion

Finally, having indicated that the therapeutic sin-talk appearing in the writings and sermons of many Orthodox Church leaders has difficulties effectively communicating with postmodernism, a crucial task seems to lie ahead of today's Orthodox Church. In particular, if our current historical era is, to a large extent, postmodern, as numerous Orthodox scholars acknowledge, then the Orthodox Church must re-think its contemporary tendency to use therapeutic sin-talk in its theological discourse and develop a sin-talk that will be less at odds with postmodernism and more capable of effectively communicating with it. So, the task facing the Orthodox Church today does not differ much from the task St. Paul the Apostle faced in his day. Just as St. Paul had to become "all things to all people" to effectively communicate his faith to the public square of his time,²⁴ the Orthodox Church is nowadays called to develop a sin-talk more compatible with postmodernism to communicate its Christian faith in a postmodern environment more effectively. But how will this

²³ John Romanides, *An Outline of Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics* (Rollinsford: Orthodox Research Institute, 2004), p. 77.

²⁴ 1 Cor. 9.22.

happen? And what will this sin-talk be? These questions, albeit fundamental, are beyond the scope of this study, the sole aim of which was to show why the Orthodox therapeutic sin-talk has difficulties effectively communicating with postmodernism. My hope, however, and with this, I wish to end my paper, is that by raising these questions, the Orthodox Church will be encouraged to seriously consider and practically answer them by creatively revising its commonly used therapeutic sin-talk.