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GOD

It is remarkable that all the attempts by historians to find a single non-religious people, or even a small tribe, that lived at any particular historical period available for scholars’ study, have been no success. Some will ascribe the ubiquitous religiousness in those far-off days to the lack of knowledge of the laws of nature and to the failure of ancient people to see natural causes

underlying major natural phenomena, especially those arousing their fear or striking them with glamorous beauty and grandeur. Hence – their fantasies about the existence of another world, a realm of spirits, gods, and God. But when finally the long-awaited era of science came as the time of tremendous progress of science and technology, little changed in this respect. Statistics continues stubbornly to assert that overwhelming majority of the population on the planet Earth believe in the existence of the Super Divine Being - God. A great many scientists, philosophers, writers, politicians and all kinds of public figures and artists proclaim their faith in His existence expressing confidence in His involvement in both their public and private life. Doesn't this fact invite thought?

WHY DO I LIVE?

*Oh, my prophetic soul, dear!
My troubled heart!
How fast in awe and fear
Your tender beating grows,
As its duality life shows.*
Fyodor Tyutchev

Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin raised this question with a dramatic force:

*My life is gift that's good for nothing.
"Why are you given me?"-I'm asking
What alien hand from non-existence
Has brought me out and with persistence
Forced me to live and not to cherish
A life that's doomed to utter perish?
Who has my soul filled with passion?
And troubled mind with hesitation?
Life has no goal for me in store,
And with nothing in my heart to care for,
I am tormented by its dumbness,
By its monotony and morbid calmness.*

Many people today experience similar anxiety. If they had a talent as Pushkin did, they might have expressed in similar words their feelings about the tormenting and paradoxical human life and its perplexingly mysterious nature.

Then Metropolitan of Moscow, Filaret (Drozdov), who enjoyed recognition as a wise man among his compatriots and now, canonized by the Church, is venerated among saints, reacted to Pushkin's poem in his own poetical and kind- fatherly way:

*No, God's gift of life is not in vain,
It has its purpose and a way.
If gloom and sadness is award,
It is His fair judgment and your own fault:
You have declined divine protection,
And turned to evil your attention;*

*Have filled your heart with passions' fever;
Have opened mind to doubt and fear.
Call back the One, you have forsaken –
To bring back light, dark force has taken,
To lift up darkness from your brain – and then again,
Your heart is pure, thoughts are sane.*

The poet's inquisitive soul was deeply moved by this unexpected response of the famous hierarch. Deeply touched, Pushkin sent him a message of gratitude, saying:

*Emotional tears have flooded my face
And hurting conscience felt good and pure -
It was anointed by your words' grace,
And I am happy with a blessed cure.*

WHAT PUSHKIN LEFT BEHIND

*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh,
and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,
is not of the Father, but of the world*

I Jn.2:16

The Russian man of genius, Pushkin, has found an answer to the most crucial question. He came to realize and to feel with all his heart how senseless and empty *this* life to be ultimately taken away by the merciless death would have been, if there had been no *other* – eternal – life. He felt that “*otherness*” of life with a joyous realization that the death of the body is not the end, but just a state of transition to an ever-lasting life, filled with God's love. As is known, with His name on the lips he passed into that *other* life.

The life in the 19th century in many respects was like that of our time. Formally, the Russian Empire was Orthodox, but according to many men of authority of our Church of that time, Orthodoxy was little known. True, the people strictly observed the tradition and rituals of the Church. But the high-society – land lords and intelligentsia – of that time was contaminated by nihilism, mason's ideas and mysticism in all the forms of its expression. All these things came to Russia from the educated Europe.

From the historical point of view, harsh attacks on religion and open negation of God's existence along with the propaganda of materialism as the cult of “intellect” began in Russia not so long ago – in the second half of the 18th century. This trend origination and revealed itself in the most “revealing” form in France wherefrom it spread over to other countries. The so-called “enlighteners” were the ideologists of this trend. Although they themselves were neither scientists nor practical explorers of nature, they affirmed that science refutes religion and God's existence. They would shamelessly present their own, often absurd ideas, as scientifically established facts. Thus these fantastic authors announced the person of Jesus Christ to be a mythological character, disregarding available witnesses about him left not only by many Christian authors of the first century, but also by the widely known Roman and other historians of that time, including such, as

Pliny, the Younger; Suetonius, Tacitus, Josephus Flavius, and others.

Worthy of our attention is the fact that the propaganda of this kind of ideas unexpectedly found a powerful financial and circulation support from certain quarters. The ideas of atheism began to spread quickly throughout Europe and were often accompanied by blood-shedding revolutions. These ideas could not pass Russia by either. Catherine II called Voltaire as her teacher. Naturally, the entire high-society became infected with these ideas. For some time, in his early youth, Pushkin also shared them.

The triumphant march of atheism reached its pinnacle in Russia after the revolution of 1917, when religion was forced out from man's consciousness and atheism became the "lone scientific worldview" for the next 70 years.

What do atheism and religion imply? What is their foundation?

WHERE IS TRUST STRONGER?

*If they hear not Moses and the prophets,
neither will they be persuaded, though
one rose from the dead.*

Lk.16:31

Some say that religion is just an ungrounded belief with no arguments supporting it. Without going into details about whether or not this affirmation is justified, it seems pertinent to point out that even a superficial acquaintance with the "scientific atheism" shows that it is nothing but mere belief and an ardent desire of God's non-existence that lay in the foundation of this worldview.

As is known, a theory is qualified as scientific, only if it is grounded on facts and offers a possibility to verify its postulates. Let us look at atheism and religion from this viewpoint.

What does atheism offer?

For the beginning let us discuss one simple example. To assert that there are squirrels in a forest the witness of several people who have seen them will suffice. But to refute their witness is a much more difficult job – one will have to carry out a thorough exploration of the life in that forest. And even after that, doubt remains that the explorers might have missed seeing them.

In even a greater degree similar approach should be applied to the discussion about God's existence.

First of all, there is witness of personal experience of many people living at different time and in different countries, as well as a countless number of events and phenomena which cannot be explained scientifically, but which occurred when people were directly appealing to God. It would suffice to mention St. Nicholas of Myra, Ksenia of St. Peteresburg, St. Ioann of Krondschtadt to remove all the doubts about the super-natural source of their wonder-works. The prominent Russian philosopher of the 20th century, Sergey Bulgakov, whose own experience of God's presence in life turned him from a Marxist atheist into an Orthodox priest, wrote: *"If all religious believers should have started to tell the stories of their life and about what they have seen and learned, and*

piled their stories together, a huge mountain would have grown and hidden the small hill of skeptical rationalism."

Secondly, it is absolutely clear that the scientific knowledge of the past, present and future in its entirety will be unable to comprise the world's existence as a whole. Academician Naan of the Russian Academy of Science wrote: *"At any level of the development of civilization, our knowledge would represent just a tiny island in the boundless ocean of things that remain unstudied, unknown and unexplored."* So, even if there were no God, science would not be able to assert it as an established fact. "I do not know," is the best answer to be given. Meanwhile, a great number of scientists of different historical periods up to the present time have been coming to the belief in God thanks to their scientific research.

Therefore affirmation that there is no God claiming to be part of a scientific worldview contradicts rudimentary logic and is absolutely anti-scientific.

Another noteworthy fact: religion, unlike atheism that offers no arguments in support of its faith, calls upon man to experience the conditions that would help him acquire conviction of God's real existence and to understand that this life is given to him to get prepared for the eternal life. Atheism does not give an answer to the question about *what an educated man should do to get conviction of God's non-existence*. Without an answer to this question, the construction of atheism, as it were, is tumbling down. That is why atheism has nothing else to do but to appeal: *"Believe me, man, there is no God and no soul; nor is there life after death. There is nothing except the existence in this world. Believe me, that eternal death and ultimate destruction await you as a human being."* It is clear what spiritual and moral consequences could be logically expected to come out from such faith.

The "truth" of atheism takes on a particularly dramatic character in connection with some conclusions of modern science. Academician Moiseyev of the Russian Academy of Science, for example, asserts in his book: *"Humanity as a biological species is mortal, and in this sense, the end of human history will come one day. It may come not at some time of indefinite future, but probably as early as in middle of the twentieth century."* He warns further: *"Global catastrophe might unleash so fast and unexpected that people, taken unawares, would be helpless. All hopes for technical devises would be good for nothing and new technologies will not save us... New commandments are needed..."* (N. Moiseyev, *Will Humanity Be or Not to Be*)

If an imminent eternal death awaits humankind, to what kind of a "happy future" should man devote his life and work?

For all that notwithstanding, objections denying the existence of God do not cease.

"THERE IS NO GOD, BECAUSE..."

1. "God-Love and sufferings are incompatible"
2. "There are contradictions in the Gospels"
3. "Science and Christianity contradict each other"
4. "Nobody has seen God"

The fool hath said in his heart,
There is no God.

1. “God-Love and sufferings are incompatible”

If God is Love, there could be no sufferings, especially of the innocent. This is one of the most widely spread arguments in the discussion about God’s existence. The argument, of course, is not relative to God’s being, but rather to the Christian doctrine about God. The mistake occurs because of confusion of two concepts – morality and spirituality. Morality is about the manner of man’s behavior and of his attitude to the world around him – to public norms of behavior, to other people, to work and to law. For the definition of morality, we use such terms, as justice, honesty, mercy, style of life. Man’s morality and especially its violations are always evident for other people as well as for the offender himself.

Spirituality concerns man’s inner world, which is invisible for other people. Here are man’s secret desires, aspirations, dreams, his care or not care for other people, envy, sober self-assessment or vanity, pride, soul’s purity or dirty thoughts and intentions, and so on. In Christianity, spirituality as a feature of man implies a pure soul free from passions and a specific community with God.

It is important to make difference between morality and spirituality to understand the origin of sufferings. A person may be impeccable from the point of view of morality, but at the same time be deeply faulty spiritually. A “holy demon,” people say about such persons. Therefore, when question arises why this or that person is suffering, or why this or that calamity happens, Christianity says: this is a result of sin that not necessarily should be actually committed in real life.

It may take place in the depths of man’s soul. Any sin, whether committed in spiritual or moral sphere, is man’s self-inflicted wound. It is difficult to say which of the wounds is more serious – caused by theft and deception or by concealed hatred and envy. Christ was crucified by seemingly highly moral, though spiritually “possessed,” hierarchs, Pharisees- theologians! Later, under Romans’ occupation of Jerusalem, many of these strict followers of the Law of God and their children encountered harsh adversities.

Man’s spiritual state like some birth-giving solution generates corresponding good or bad crystals in the inside and outside life. Righteous people also suffer – they are not perfect in all respects either. The sins, which from the point of view of “common” sinners are no sins at all, for a person leading a righteous life would cause serious pangs of conscience. Likewise, sorrows that cause suffering and depression to spiritually weak people, lead holy people to a greater perfection. As folk’s wisdom goes, a heavy sledgehammer breaking glass is forging sword. At the same time, however, the troubles and sorrows that befall an individual person (or a nation) is proof that he (or it), though spiritually sick, is still alive. Sorrows are a cure to heal those who are alive, not who are dead.

Misfortunes are not a punishment of God. They are inevitable consequences of the moral (visible) and spiritual (hidden in human heart) sins. In the long run, nothing but indomitable passions, namely: seeking of enjoyment and glory, servitude to one’s instincts, pride, greediness, love of power, etc. are the causes of all innumerable human troubles. The passions torment man and destroy his private and public life tuning him into a puppet of dark forces. It is not God who brings about family squabbling, who unleashes international conflicts, strikes alcoholics with cirrhosis of liver, or troubles a conceited man with his family’s misfortunes. One holy man formulated a rule:

"Do not sin not to grieve." St Anthony the Great living the fourth century unambiguously pointed out: "God is good and his doings are good; He never does harm to anyone.... When we happen to be good, we come into communion with God, as those created in His likeness, but when we are hateful, we distance ourselves from Him, being unlike Him. Our virtuous life makes us God's people, but when we are bad, we are rejected by Him. But this does not mean that He is angry at us. This means that our sins do not let God shine in us, but push us instead to be together with our tormentors, demons."

Sufferings of children are of a different nature.

Life of every individual and life of all generations leaves a legacy of good and bitter fruit of spiritual and moral, scientific and cultural activities, which reveals itself in the life of posterity. God does not take away spiritual and moral freedom from man, *"for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man; but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed."* (James 1:13-14)

There is nothing accidental about human life; it runs in conformity with law. Ask medical doctors, why babies are born sick or get sick without any apparent reason, and you will get many explanations: heredity, bad ecology, chemical food additives, high radioactivity, stresses, drunken parents... Why these causes do not affect all babies? Geneticists, biologists and doctors can give you a precise answer today.

Christianity teaches that a baby is fruit of humankind, one of its small cells containing both positive and negative elements of the spiritual and moral life of the ancestors, the baby's parents in the first place. The unrepentant sins of fathers and forefathers generate hereditary passions, the so-called ancestral or genetic sins, in their descendants that strike them with various diseases and misfortunes. However, the sufferings are a cure to relieve the hereditary spiritual sickness of the children on the one hand, and to bring similar good effect for their relatives and neighbors and for the world around, on the other.

This is how children's sufferings are seen from the Christian perspective. Their sufferings are the fulfilment of the law of love. Just like Christ, sinless and innocent, has suffered for people and reached the highest glory and highest bliss, so also the sufferings of innocent children will bring similar results for them in the future life.

As Apostle Paul said, *"Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal"* (2Cor.4:17-18); and *"the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."* (Rom.8:18)

St. Ephraim of Syria wrote: *"Glory be to you, our God, from the mouths of infants, who as innocent lambs in the Eden, are being fed in your Kingdom! As the Lord God said, they are nurtured among the trees, and Archangel Gabriel is the shepherd of this flock. They are higher in the rank than virgins and saints; they are children of God in Holy Spirit's charge. They are associates of high forces, friends of the sons of the light, inhabitants of pure land; they are far away from the land of perdition. On the day when they hear the voice of the Son of God, they will rejoice and their bones will be happy; and the freedom that had no time to trouble their spirit would bow its head. Few as were their days on earth, their life was ensured in the Garden of Eden; and their parents do not have a greater desire*

than to approach the place of their habitation.” (Burial Songs “*Blessed are those who die as infants*”)

It is worth mentioning that children’s sufferings often induce their parents and relatives to think about the meaning of their life and about the inevitability of death, bringing them to belief in God and to repentance. In this way, children have saved many grown-up people.

The revelation of the implications and purpose of the earthly sufferings comes only via Christian belief that life does not end with one’s death, but that it is just a serious preparatory period to get man ready for the eternal life. Because God is Love, any suffering serves a very important, eternal purpose.

If there were no God, would there be any sense in the boundless sea of human sufferings? Are they a result of a random play of the blind forces of nature, something brought about by mere force of circumstances or by ruthless arbitrariness of human cruelty? There is only one possible conclusion: without belief in God and in the eternal life, sufferings become totally senseless. Unrequited despair is the fruit born by the blind belief in God’s non-existence.

2. There are contradictions in Gospels.

This objection comes from unawareness that Gospel has two sides. One is where external circumstances of the earthly life of Jesus Christ are described. This is where the authors of the New Testament report about what they saw themselves or heard about from others. It is possible to find here some inaccuracy in the presentation of facts and contradictions in the narration of one and the same event by different authors (e.g. one or two possessed with devils who met Jesus Christ – Mt. 8:28 and Mk.5:1; or how many times cock crew when Apostle Peter denied knowing Christ – Mt.26:75 and Mk 14:72). Such discrepancy is usual when different people describe one event. Moreover, the existence of this kind of discrepancies confirm the authenticity of the witness of the authors of the Gospels and show the respectful attitude of all who copied these texts. It would have not been difficult to correlate the texts or even remove these contradictions.

The other side of the of the Gospel provides for the basis of the Christian confession and is its primary source. It comprises the teaching about God, about Christ, about commandments and about other truths of faith and life. This teaching contains no contradictions. For Christianity, this is Divine Revelation. The Gospel’s teaching cannot be looked upon as yet another religious philosophic system that can be discussed from the point of view of our logic and frame of mind. Our logic and assumptions are not applicable to *that sphere of life*. Christianity has a number of objective arguments witnessing to its Divine origin.

3. Science and Christianity contradict each other.

No, this is not so.

First, when we talk about relations between science and religion, we do not mean the entire range of human knowledge under science, but we usually mean natural sciences – physics, biology, astronomy, etc. Religious knowledge, in its turn, comprises spiritual world and its laws, and as such, it differs from empiric sciences. In other words, each of the two is dealing with its respective side of the life of man and world. The two can adjoin and intersect, but they are incommensurable just like incommensurable are kilogram and kilometer, or geopolitics and geodesy. Because of that, science and religion cannot disprove one the other. *“The pie-man, that doth try to cobble shoes; the cobbler,*

that doth take to pies and stews, will find with them things go badly! (a fable by Ivan Krylov)

It is not important for religion of what bricks the Universe is constructed, whether the Earth goes around the Sun or vice versa; whether God has created all forms of life in their final form or just provided the laws of their gradual development, etc. This kind of questions do not belong to the realm of religion; these questions belong in the field of science. The well-known French scholar and Christian, Pasteur, said about science that *there is neither religion, nor philosophy, or atheism, neither materialism nor spiritualism here. The subject matter is facts and only facts.*

It is a remarkable fact that before the New Time came, monks and clergy played the role of scholars dealing with science and its development. Therefore, in the Roman-Catholic Middle Ages, it was not religion fighting with science, but old scientific views with a new vision, often resorting to pseudo-ecclesiastical theories at that. Before our time there were also quite a few clergymen ranking among prominent figures of science. (e.g. Nicholas Kopernik, St. Metropolitan innokentiy Veniaminov of Moscow; abbot Gregor Mendel; priest Pavel Florenskiy, a theologian and scholar; pastor W. Schmidt, ethnographer; Archbishop Luka Voin-Yasnetskiy; abbot Lemetr)

Second. A great number of scientists among the religious believers is an eloquent proof that there are no contradictions between science and Christian convictions. Even so prominent specialist of the Soviet “scientific” atheism and active fighter with religion as Mikhail Shakhnovich had to recognize this fact, which he did in the following words: *“Many bourgeois scholars are talking about a ‘union’ of science with religion. Max Born, Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg, Carl Friedrich von Weizsaecker, Pascual Jordan and other well-known physicists will repeatedly assert that allegedly science does not contradict religion.”* But Shakhnovich just opened a long list of religious scientists, who combined important scientific achievements with their deeply sincere belief in God and in Christ.

Mikhail Lomonosov very aptly described the “struggle” of science against religion: *“The Creator has given two book to humanity. The visible world is one...The Holy Scriptures is the second book. Both together present to us evidence not only of the existence of God, but also of His unspeakable good gifts to us. It is sin to sow weeds and discord between them.”* Science and religion *“cannot fall into strife... unless only someone, out of vanity or to show his smartness would stir up hatred on their behalf.”*

Third. The belief of some scientists in God’s non-existence, and others – in His existence unequivocally show that a solution of this question does not lie in the field of scientific knowledge.

Fourth. The infinity of the cognitive world and the ever-finite capacities of human cognition about it unambiguously point to the impossibility for science to negate God’s existence. Precisely for this reason, the “scientific atheism” is untenable from the scientific point of view.

All above said eloquently witnesses to the falseness of the made-up idea about the confrontation between science and religion.

4. Nobody has seen God

- But have you seen your own intellect? – asked a seminarian in response to one quarrelsome visitor of the Trinity-St. Sergius Laura, the believer in God’s non-existence.

- Hm, well, No

- So, you do not have...?

Accompanied by unanimous laughter of his friends the embarrassed skeptic stepped back.

By the way, we believe in the existence of many things and phenomena, which nobody has ever seen, and some of which man is unable to see. We trust our five feelings that inform us about the existence of the world of sounds, colors, light, tastes, and so on, although physics plainly affirms that these are but our individual subjective feelings, whereas there is an objective world, very different from the world of our subjective feelings. We believe in the existence of love, good and beauty, although we can see only some of their expressions, not them as such. We believe in the existence of the sub-nuclear reality, in the existence of quarks and strings, of some strange infinity (or finitude?) of the Universe, of black holes, etc.

In short, have we see all that we call knowledge? With some exception our knowledge includes what we receive because of believing our parents, friends, teachers, scientists, politicians, films, Internet, mass media, which unfortunately, not only can error, but often deceive us. So why should we not believe the pure-hearted people, saints, who say to have known God not just by seeing Him, but feeling Him with their whole being, for whom many of them have given up their life?

Above mentioned are the most frequently voiced objections regarding the existence of God. Not convincing at all, these objections prompt us to suggest that a solution of this problem is possible only via our own individual verification of ways and means for knowing God that are offered by religion, the Orthodox Christianity above all. There is no other way.

Thus, paradoxically as it might seem, both religion and atheism together call upon every person in search of the meaning of life to explore individually the Christian way of knowing God.

THERE IS GOD

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so That they are without excuse...

Rom. 1:20

There is a story about a rich man and a coachman taking the rich man somewhere in a carriage. Passing by churches on the way, the coachman would make a sigh of cross. The passenger, a man educated in the spirit of *“Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,”* was making fun of him, but his mocking remarks fell on a deaf ear – there was no reaction from the coachman. When they reached their destination, the rich man paid for the trip and was about to leave, when the coachman’s sudden question stopped him: “But what if He does exist, sir?” This simple and clear question had a stronger impact on the rich man than all the tricks of atheistic scheming. The question dumbfounded him and soon afterwards he became a sincere Orthodox believer.

Of course every person has his or her own individual experience of the event of God, but for many

it begins with the direct question: "Is there a God?"

Out of many arguments in favor of His existence, here are the simplest and easiest to comprehend.

1. Teleological arguments

The message of this argument is this. The organization of the world, both of its separate parts and as one whole alike, amazes by its harmony and logical running, which witnesses to the super-reason and omnipotence of the force that has created it. Only God can be such a force.

Indeed, the striking beauty and astounding expedience of the world's organization in all its parts, from big to the tiniest, that reveal themselves to man in the process of learning, cannot but always be amazing. Pythagoras, for one, was amazed by the picture of a starlit sky and called it cosmos (beauty)

Here are a few descriptions by contemporary scientists in this regard. According to Paul Davis, *"The balance between gravitational and electro-magnetic interactions within stars is preserved with almost unthinkable precision. The calculations show that a change as little as by 10^{-40} of any of these interactions might be catastrophic for stars of the Sun type."* (Paul Davis, **Superforce**, p. 265. Moscow, 1989, Russian translation)

Prof. Michael Ruse discussing the question of possible first cause of the world suggests: *"Pondering the question of the first cause of the world, returns us, as a matter of fact, to the recognition of the existence of some kind of a Super Force, which would be absolutely correct to call God. By the way, it seems to me that such argumentation could be rightfully placed within the category of arguments that are traditionally known as teleological."* He further says: *"The suggestion that behind the visible being of the Universe, behind its arrangement, there must stand some Reason, has been gathering traction nowadays, as more and more trustworthy."* (Michael Ruse. **Science and Religion – Still at War?** Questions of Philosophy, 1991, No. 2 in Russian)

Modern science has no doubt about the anthropic (reasonable) organization of the world. Well known physicist Ralf Estling described this principle in the following terms: *"In absolutely everything – from the permanent characteristics featuring gravitational, electro-magnetic, strong and weak nuclear interactions up to the major biological preconditions – we find that cosmos as a whole and the Sun in particular, but especially the Earth, are adjusted to fit our being so well, that inevitable question arises: was it not God or any other similarly powerful force that has created all this, especially us, human beings? The construction is too grandiose and complex to ascribe its origin to mere chance or even miracle."* (Paul Davis, **Superforce**)

How has life come into being? Science does not know a law under which any material structure would generate life! The assumption that life might emerge as a result of a certain molecular coupling is so unlikely (according to some estimations the degree of probability is 10^{-255}) which, according to American scientist Custler, in fact excludes any possibility for the appearance of life. *The theory that a living structure could appear at one certain moment via accidental interaction of two molecules should be rejected*, in his opinion. Another scientist says that *the likelihood of a spontaneous appearance of any cell is equal to the likelihood of a monkey to be able to print the full text of the Bible 400 times without a single mistake.* (Ben Hobrunk. **Evolution. Egg without Hen**)

Many scientists of the past and present days, having found no more convincing explanation of the existing beauty and the orderly organization of the life of the world around us, than by the power the highly reasonable Creator, will come to the belief in God. Thus, our prominent scientist, academician and director of the Institute of Brain Studies Natalya Bekhterova, addressing a hearing on Faith and Knowledge: Science and Technology at the Turn of the Century, said: *“Having devoted my whole life to studying human brain, I cannot help concluding that it is practically impossible to comprehend how this wondrous thing as human brain could have appeared without the involvement of the Creator.”*

The convincing power of the teleological argument consists primarily in the fact that it confronts us with an dilemma about the origin of life: was it the Divine Intellect that has created so orderly and expediently organized world, or “some unknown” and accidental force? The first option does not only answer the question, but also reveals for man the meaning of his life, whereas the second leaves us without “rudder or sail.”

2. Historical arguments

The historical argument as the most strong was used by the famous orator and political leader of the first century before our era, Marcus Tullius Cicero. This is what he said: *“We find it important to point out that there is no tribe that would be so wild, nor a man that would be so unaware of his moral obligations, as to have no idea about gods. Many people think wrongly about gods, but this usually is the case because of their fallaciousness and depravity. However, all people are confident of the existence of a divine force and a divine being. Such confidence does not come from any bargain or agreement reached by people; this idea of the existence of gods is not based on state edicts or laws. This unanimity of thought shared by all peoples must be respected as law of nature.”*

Plutarch, a writer, historian and philosopher of Ancient Greece sharing this conviction said: *“One may visit a lot of countries and find cities without walls, without written language, without rulers, without castles, without riches and without money, but nobody yet has seen cities without temples and gods where people would not offer up their prayers and not use the name of god to confirm their words...”*

The ubiquitous presence of religion in the mankind is one of the most impressive factors of world history. What explanations of this fact are there? All atheistic hypotheses offering various versions to explain the appearance of idea of God in human conscience by so-called “natural” causes have turned out absolutely feeble. Ignorance of ancient people and their inability to explain natural calamities and their fear of them is the major atheistic explanation. The present time has discovered the mechanism of dreams, has made a gigantic breakthrough in the exploration of the universe; man now knows everything; his fears and awes have ceased, but the religious worldview all the same remains to be the leading one in the world. According to a public opinion poll carried out by the British association Ipsos MORI in 2011, 7 of every 10 people confess a religion.

One cannot but admit that there is only one reasonable explanation of this fact, which is that the surviving force of the religious faith throughout the history of humankind is not a “fruit of the earth;” it comes from one possible source – God Himself.

3. The arguments of religious experience

A brief departure from the course of our discussion:

*“In 1790, a meteorite fell near one small town in France. The Mayor put together a protocol about this occasion, which was signed by 300 eye-witnesses. He sent the document to the Paris Academy. Do you think that the academicians thanked for this contribution to science? Nothing of the kind. The Paris Academy not only reacted with a many-page study, entitled as *On the Absurdity of Stones’ Falling from the Sky*, but even issued a resolution... “If there is no God, there can be no stones falling from the sky,” was the conclusion of the members of the Paris Academy....*

Very slowly people have started to understand that their daily experience is not all-embracing, that it covers only some superficial sides of the events, that the reach-out of their common sense is limited; that there are very many irrefutable facts that in their opinion contradict the seemingly self-evident truths.” These words belong to historian Aleksandr Gorbovskiy. He said so in his book, *The Enigmas of Ancient History*.

*“By the way, when conclusions of science disagree with the facts, preference is given to the fact (provided that the facts happen again and again) (Vladimir Klyachko, **Science Studies the World**.)*

The existence of God is the fact that has been verified “again and again.” Since the first days of human history, people of various nationalities, languages, cultures, different levels of education, often knowing nothing about one another, have been witnessing with amazing unanimity about a real, inexpressible and deep personal experience of God, which was precisely the experience of **GOD**, and not of something supernatural or mystical.

Is there any reason to reject the experience of the innumerable multitude of people witnessing apparition of God - seeing Him not with the help of some technical devices or in photos, but with their own eyes. Among such witnesses, who were great scholars in their respective fields, there are saints, for whom deception was unthinkable. These people performed miracles, predicted future; they suffered through the hardships of living as outcasts in exile for their faith and word of the truth, for their steadfast belief in God and Christ.

Could it be so that people like, Apostles Peter and Paul, St. Justin the Philosopher, St. Paul the Simple, St. Macarios the Great and St. Sergius of Radonezh, St. Clement of Rome, St. Isaak of Syria, St. John the Russian and St. Savva of Serbia, St. Seraphim of Sarov and St. Ignatius Bryanchaninov, Ambrosius of Optina, St. George of the Don, as well as Khomyakov, Dostoyevskiy, Pascal and Lomonosov, Mendel and Mendeleev, Voyno-Yasnetskiy and Bekhterev - to name just some of many more famous personalities - would believe in God exclusively because it was “tradition,” or because they all were uneducated dreamers?

How should we deal with this remarkable fact? Doesn't it invite our thinking? Can we deny the existence of God only because our daily experience does not show Him to us? But then our daily experience gives us practically nothing of what the scientists are talking; and we have trust in their discoveries, we believe them without knowing them personally and usually with no possibility to verify their reports. On what grounds is it possible to reject as not trustworthy the experience of God's presence witnessed by a great number of the people of pure conscience?

Theirs is the experience of the *science of sciences* – spiritual life, a witness about faith that is not

ungrounded; it is not a witness about an opinion, or an accepted hypothesis, or a tradition. Theirs is the witness about the fact of God's existence.

How right Sergiy Bulgakov is saying in his book, ***The Unfading Light***, that *religious experience in its ingenuousness is neither scientific, nor philosophic, neither esthetic, nor ethical in nature. Just like the perception of beauty is not possible by intellect (it is possible only to think about it), so also an obscure vision of the burning religious experience comes out of thinking ... The life of saints, of zealots of faith, prophets and founding fathers of religions, as well as the live mementos of religion – written language, cult, customs, etc – together with man's own individual experience make up a more reliable source to bring people into the field of religious learning, that an abstract philosophizing about it.*

He further wrote in this book: *“Meeting with God, as the main religious experience, is so triumphantly strong and so ardently convincing – at least at its highest points – that it leaves behind any other reality. This experience is possible to forget or lose, but it is not possible to refute. The history of humankind, as far as human self-awareness is concerned, would be some absolutely unfathomable enigma and absurdity, if not to admit that humanity grounds itself on the living religious experience.”*

HOW TO BECOME A RELIGIOUS BELIEVER?

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you

Mt. 7:7

To give a brief answer to this question the following points should be mentioned as major prerequisites.

(1) Awareness of one's moral fallibility; of the emptiness and senselessness of one's life in the face of the inevitable death. As St. Isaac of Syria said, *“Whom shall I call reasonable? Only him who remembers that life ends.”* The awareness of this fact leads one to the search of the meaning of life and evokes a wish to purify his soil from the accumulated dirt. This is a way to God, who *“did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”* (Mt. 9:13)

(2) Without a heartfelt desire to find the answer to the question about the purpose of one's own life, it is difficult for man to become a believer. Belief in God is not an entertainment or a custom to be observed. Belief in God implies an ardent search of the truth that takes a feeling heart and open mind. Only such people are capable of finding a true faith. It is not worth mentioning those who believe in God out of tradition, without thinking and any effort. Such effortless faith, as far as its spiritual value is concerned, is little different from belief in God's non-existence, also traditional. Even accepted, such faith does not change man's moral and spiritual life. That is why Christ said to one of His disciples, who before staying with Christ wanted first to bury his father: *“Let the dead bury their dead.”* (Lk. 9:56-60). A devoted search of the Truth always leads to God and to life in accordance with His commandments. This is what is promised to us: *“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”* (Mt.7:7-8) This kind of search is a primary prerequisite on way to God.

(3) Decision to live in conformity with conscience and in accordance with the Gospel's morality, which is very different from the so-called generally accepted morality of mankind that denounces only most insolent and obvious man's misconduct. The decision to cleanse the conscience – through a sincere heartfelt repentance – from all dirty, dishonest and ill-minded doings ever committed in life. This should be an inner repentance of the heart, repentance before those whom one offended, repentance before priest, if, of course, the soul permits to do so. This is very important, because only *“the pure in heart shall see God.”* (Mt. 5:8)

(4) Study of Christianity, of the Holy Scriptures in the first place, and especially the New Testament, as well as the works of the holy fathers and of prominent zealots of the Church. If possible, it is also good to say a prayer asking the yet unknown God to grant forgiveness for the committed sins and beseeching His help to fight passions and His support for an honest and righteous life.

These are just very first steps on the way to God, but without them it is hardly possible for that something that could be identified as a religious faith to be born in man's soul.

WHAT IS RELIGION

A prayer is freeing one's mind from all things existing here and now.

St. Isaac of Syria

Though religion is an inherent phenomenon featuring the humankind, for many people it remains obscure and difficult to understand. It is possible to explain this strange fact by how this phenomenon is being approached. As a rule, elements that are external and secondary and often presenting themselves in a distorted form – no religion has been save from distortions - are seen as religion's identity.

Therefore, the question about the essence of religion, about which of its features are identifying it and which are inessential calls for our particular attention.

Religion has two sides: one is external that is open to see for outsiders, and internal that opens itself to believers who live in accordance with its spiritual and ethical norms.

Externally, religion first of all is a *worldview*, comprising a number of principles (truths) without which religion loses its identity turning into magic, shamanism, occultism, etc., or becoming a religious philosophic doctrine that does not concern man's internal life. As a worldview, religion is always public and presents itself in a more or less developed organization (church) with a certain structure, morality, rules of life, cult, and so on.

But the identical essence of religion (its internal side) consists in man's spiritual contact with God implying man's life in accordance with His commandments and man's permanent turning to His with prayer, because only prayer connects man to God. The very etymology of the term “religion” speaks of such spiritual unity: the Latin “religare” means to “relate, ” to “unite.” Therefore religion is defined as a spiritual union of God and man.

Righteous spiritual life cleanses Christians from egoism, pride, hypocrisy, jealousy and other

passions crippling human soul, and fills it with generous good will towards all people, as well as with compassion and tolerance - with all that makes every man pleasant for other people and for God. As Christians grow more and more spiritually pure, they become more and more sensitive to receive all that good, about which Apostle Paul spoke so eloquently, repeating the words of the Prophet Isaiah: *“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.”* (1 Cor. 2:9)

BASIC TRUTHS OF RELIGION

Soul sees God's truth by power of life
St. Isaac of Syria.

Belief in the existence of a spiritual, perfect, personal Source, a creator of man and of the whole world - *God* - who always reacts actively to the spiritual and moral state of people, is the primary truth of religion. The expression of this truth— in the form, content and clarity – is different in different religions: monotheistic (belief in one God); polytheistic (belief in many gods); dualistic (belief in two divine sources – of good and of evil).

Christianity reveals new, unknown before characteristics of God. He is Love. (1 Jn. 4:8); He is our Father (Mt.6:8, 9); we live, move and exist thanks to Him (Acts 17:28). He is unchangeable ideal of good, truth and beauty. Spiritual unity with Him is the ultimate goal of man's aspirations.

The second important truth of religion is a doctrine asserting that man is the highest God's creation having only a body, but also a *soul*, the bearer of intellect and heart (an organ of feelings) of will, of one's own personal identity capable of coming into community with God, and with spiritual world. According to Christian teaching, man is an *image* of God.

The next truth is belief in the *Revelation* of God that instructs man in true faith and norms of life. Christianity calls man to the highest level of perfection – holiness, or spiritual personal union with God.

The mentioned-above truths are inseparably connected with the teaching on life after death. In the Christian Revelation, we find even more than that, which is a teaching about universal resurrection and about the eternal life of man as a whole, not only of his soul.

Belief in the existence of the supernatural world of angels and demons is another characteristic feature of religion. Man's activity and behavior bring him into a spiritual contact with them and as a result man receives either a great assistance in life or serious hardships .

There are many other elements featuring every religion, all organically and logically related to the main ones described above.

A doctrine that is void of these basic truths cannot claim to be a religion.

WAS MAN EVER WITHOUT GOD?

Look at the face of the earth: you will not find a single

The biblical response to this question is well known: the first people directly communicated with God, and this communication, though in a considerably weaker and differing form, has continued all throughout the following years into our days. History does not know any single community of people or a tribe that would have no religion. Atheism as a public phenomenon appeared only a few centuries ago, and now it embraces less than one third of world's population.

The question of the time when religion appeared is directly related to the question of time of the appearance of man. Though there is no scientific answer to this question yet, the undoubted fact is that science does not know if man was ever non-religious. (We are talking here about the homo sapiens, not any other of man's supposed pre-human forms) .

In this context, the opinions of Soviet anthropologists as people who had no interest in defending the Christian teaching about the initial presence of religion in human life deserve our particular attention.

As modern science suggests the appearance of man – homo sapiens – could be dated back to 30-40 thousand years ago. Academician Nikolay Dubinin wrote that *over some 10-15 million years a huge leap from animal to man was made. This process was accompanied by internal explosions of impulsive evolution, among which of the greatest importance was the leap of 30-40 thousand years ago that resulted in the appearance of modern man.* (N.P. Dubinin, **Social and Biological Aspects of the Problem of Man Today**, in the *Questions of Philosophy*, 1972, No. 10)

World-known professor of anthropology, President of the American Anthropological Association in 1951, William Howells, asserts the same: *...About 35 thousand years BC Neanderthals suddenly gave way to people of absolutely modern physical complexion, who in fact were no different from today's Europeans in any way, if only they were of a sturdier build* (quoted from the **Kuryer**, No 819, 1972).

It is important what the scientists say about the religious belief shared by the people of the era accessible for ethnography. Soviet scholar of religions, Sergey Tokarev believes that *even Neanderthals living in the era of Moustier (about 100-140 thousand years ago), with their rather well-developed consciousness and rudimentary elements of verbalization, must have had some elementary religiousness.* Nobody doubts that people of the Aurignac-Solutre (30-40 thousand years ago) and of the Madeleine epochs - that is people of the modern homo sapiens type - had a religious faith. Soviet scientist B. Titov wrote that *according to archeological research, approximately 30-40 thousand years ago the biological formation of man was completed, and a modern man appeared. The first remains of modern man were found in France, near Cro-Magnon cave. The man was called Cromagnonian by the name of the place. The excavations of the Cromagnonian sites present rich materials witnessing to these people's rather complicated religious views.*

Many other scientists, both Russian and foreign, share this opinion. Among them there are such specialists as the famous ethnographer Wilhelm Schmidt and Prof. Bleiker. A prominent Soviet scholar of religions, Vladimir Zybkovets, sums up the above mentioned affirmations, saying that *"as far as the religiousness of Neanderthals is concerned, this is a problem of continuous discussion among the Soviet scientists. Aleksey Okladnikov and Pavel Borisovskiy, among others, believe that the graves of Neanderthals offer proof to their religiousness."* In other words, the religiousness of

Neanderthals is the point of the on-going discussion among Soviet specialists, while the question of the religiousness of the man Homo Sapiens is not. The eventual conclusion is this: any pre-religious state of humanity is unknown to science.

Whether the so-called man's predecessors, known under such names as Pithecanthropus erectus, Homo Heidelbergensis, Gigantopithecus, Australopithecus, Zindjanthropus and others - there is no counting their numbers – had a religion is empty talk until the level of their “humanity” is known. Even if we find out that these anthropomorphous creatures, without intellect and other human characteristic features, did not have religion, this fact would be of as little surprise to us, as the absence of religion among present-day orangutans and gorillas. But let us imagine that even all these “-thropuses” and “-pithecuses” were para-human. What reasons are there today to say that they had no religion? No, there are no reasons to say so either. Vladimir Zybkovets' affirmation about the “ethnography's reach-out” being limited to 100-150 thousand years ago is convincing enough in this respect.

Zybkovets also confirms the well-known historical fact that *“History of classes dates from six thousand years ago maximum...,”* thus doing away with one of the populist atheistic statements that religion was invented by the ideologists of class society as an instrument to enslave lower sections of the population. But religion, according to the same sources, has existed for at least 30-40 thousand years!

IN WHAT GOD DID FIRST PEOPLE BELIEVE?

I believe in one God
Creed

Science says that the homo sapience, who appeared some 35 thousand years ago, had a *“rather complicated religious vision.”* He confessed God as a solar cult, but was it the Sun or the “Sun of the Truth”?” Science is unable to say anything in this regard.

Archeologists and ethnographers studying the origins of the European civilization have reached only as far back as to the ruins of temple architecture of Malta (4-2 thousand years BC), but not a written iota was found on these ruins. From Crete to Mycenae (3-2 thousand years BC), some daily life notes and a few ciphered inscriptions have survived, leaving us only to guess about the nature of religious faith of that time.

Indian Vedas that are not dated earlier than two thousand years BC speak both about one God and many gods. Besides, more ancient texts, according to many researchers, are closer to monotheism, whereas later ones - to polytheism and pantheism.

Similar picture is outlined during the study of religious sources of other civilizations, including Assyrian-Babylonian, Chinese, American, and others. Scientists find clear traces of pro-monotheism below polytheism that lies closer to the surface. (*e.g. see Aleksandr Pokrovskiy, Biblical Teaching about Primitive Religion*)

The earliest dated among the ancient monuments of religious literature of the 24 century BC – the texts from the Pharaoh Unas pyramid unambiguously speak about one Creator of the *“visible and invisible world”* – Ra-Atum. (see **Andrey Zubov, Victory over the Last Enemy**)

The earliest survivor among the written sources of the history of European religion – Iliada by Homeros – is dated by 8-7th century BC.

The Christian conviction is based on the witness of the Bible, which from the very first lines asserts that the first people directly communicated with one God. The Bible says that Abraham (2000 BC) and his direct descendants preserved their faith in one God, and that commandment to worship Him is the first of Moses Decalogue (16 century BC) and is repeated in various situations described in both Old and New Testaments.

The very fact that trustworthiness of the Bible as one of the most ancient historical written sources has been confirmed by multiple scientific, and above all, archeological research is an objective ground for accepting the biblical witnesses. (e.g. see C.W. **Ceram**, Gotter, Graber und Gelehrte)

All said above offers a good reason to speak about monotheism as the first religion of mankind, which then due to a number of reasons, gradually degraded to various forms of the so-called folk (pagan or natural) religions, faiths and superstitions.

But what has prompted this degradation in the perception of God? Has it not broken the unity of faith in Him in the situation of a multiple diversity of religions?

HOW DID OTHER RELIGIONS APPEAR?

When they knew God, they glorified him not as God,
neither were thankful; but became vain in their
imaginings, and their foolish heart was darkened

Rom. 1:21

The Bible points to the fall of morality in the private and public life of ancient people as the main reason for the ebb of monotheism and emergence of polytheism and other religious and pseudo-religious faiths. The growing striving for pleasures, richness and power over other people, nature and super forces, including God, was radically distorting the very core of human consciousness opening wide way for the development of lowest passions and perversions (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah) turning man into a creature void of the perception of spiritual things and of God.

Many other non-biblical authors also refer to the deficient morality as the main cause of the distortion of religious convictions among people. Cicero, for one, said that *“many do not think correctly about gods, but this usually happens due to moral perversion and depravity; however everybody is sure that there exists Divine force and nature.”* (**Cicero**, *On the Nature of Gods*.)

As a result of moral and spiritual degradation, one God gradually took the image of an earthly ruler, whose “servants” – angels, demons, priests and heroes - were in charge of different sides of man’s life, and their attitude to man was shown by the degree of man’s wellbeing. As for one God, he gradually moved to the background of man’s consciousness and became unnecessary and obscure, whereas his “servants” turned into actual gods and inhabited heaven and earth in human imagination. This is wherefrom came various folk (pagan) faiths each with its own specific vision of God and gods: polytheism, animism, astrology, shamanism, occultism, which in their turn

generated atheism and Satanism. (for more details see **Aleksey Osipov**, *Intellect in Search of the Truth*. Not the least was the role in this process played by such personalities, as Buddha, Confucius, Zaratustra, who formed and reformed religious views of their respective followers.

At the same time the idea of one God never left human consciousness. It remained the central truth of the Jewish religion of the Old Testament founded by Moses that had existed until the coming of Jesus Christ; of Christianity, founded by Jesus Christ; and of Islam founded 600 years afterwards by Mohammed.

IS GOD ONE AND THE SAME IN ALL RELIGIONS?

If someone tells you that this and that religion is given by one God, answer:
is God of dual trust?
St. Feodosiy of the Caves

Today, at the time of growing ecumenical and inter-religious contacts, the question if different religions worship one and the same God becomes of crucial importance. Evidently, the worship of one and the same God implies the oneness of the religions, their equal value in fact, which leads human consciousness to religious indifferentism and loss of one of its most important stimuli – the search of a true faith. Naturally, the idea of creating one world religion in which all different world religions, Christianity in the first place, would dissolve, gives rise to question about whether it is theologically grounded.

In different monotheistic religions, not to speak of the principal differences between monotheism and polytheism, the image of God is very differing. There are also essential differences in the perception of God. Thus in Christianity, one God in its internal life is of three hypostases – of the Father, Son (Logos), and the Holy Spirit. The second Hypostasis, Logos, becomes flesh; the salvation of humanity is achieved via Cross, death and resurrection of Christ. There is nothing of the kind to be found in either Judaism or Islam. According to Apostle Paul, “*we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness.*” (**I Cor. 1:23**)

What do the religious differences in the teaching of God say?

God is Spirit, and He is above any definitions. But to worship Him one needs a certain *tangible* image – perceptible, symbolic, iconographic, etc. Therefore each religion has its own **image** of God, determining not only its creed and spiritual and moral teaching, but also the spiritual life of the believers. Therefore it is this **image** precisely what is the real **God** for the given religion. In other words, each religion worships **its own** God.

Thus, the “*Gentiles changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and to birds, and to four-footed beasts and creeping things... They changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator.*” (**Rom. 1:21-25**) More than that: it is possible to fall as low as to serving the devil. The Old Testament says in this respect this: “*But Jeshurum waxed fat and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation. They*

provoked him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations provoked they him to anger. They sacrificed unto devils, not to God.” (Deut. 32:15-17) Apostle Paul also wrote about worshipping devils: *“which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils.” (I Cor.10:20)* This is how it may happen that people worshipping devil would think that they were worshipping God. *“But what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial?” (2 Cor.6:14-15)* The above-said proves that the idea of one God in many religions is wrong.

But is there a religion that has good reasons to claim that its image of God has been revealed by God Himself, and because of that it is the true religion?

TRUTHFULNESS OF CHRISTIANITY

I am the way, the truth, and the life

Jn. 14:16

Every religion is confident of its truthfulness, proclaiming that all its truths are no fruit of human mind, but are given by God Himself. This fact prompts one to question: what arguments are due to prove this affirmation?

The Christian teaching, for example, offers a great number of truths that will be unheard-of and unthinkable for all other religions, preceding Christianity and contemporary ones alike. All these truths do not come from a philosopher or a theologian, but from a common, uneducated Wanderer. This circumstance in particular calls for discussing the arguments that point to the super-natural origin of Christianity and its doctrine.

1. Historical arguments

The very appearance and survivability of Christianity remains a big enigma for atheism. Friedrich Engels, a great atheistic authority researching this issue, wrote: *“Christianity... appeared in Palestine, but it is unknown how.”* (K. Marx, F. Engels, On Religion)

Multiple sources offer a scientifically and historically absolutely convincing answer to the question of the origin of Christianity. The New Testament, comprising 27 books of eight authors - the apostles who eye-witnessed the events they described - is one the most important sources. Among other sources are witnesses of close associates of the apostles, who are traditionally called as Apostolic Fathers (1st-2nd cc), and of their followers – first apologists and early fathers of the Church (2nd -3rd cc AD).

The content of all Christian sources could be summed up in the following few theses. A unique apparition of God in the flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ took place in human history. Jesus Christ is the Messiah, Who was promised by Jewish Prophets of the old times. Jesus Christ has proved his messianic dignity by the absolute holiness of life, by astounding miracles and by unprecedented - in the history of religious consciousness – teaching about God and about conditions of man’s salvation.

Major historical facts contained in the Christian written sources are confirmed by quite a few written non-Christian witnesses of the same era. There are also innumerable “mute” witnesses – Christian catacombs, churches and their ruins, images, icons, coins, etc – that are eloquent both

about the time – the first half of the 1st century – and about how (sudden) the emergence of Christianity was.

In addition to these, there have survived witnesses of many non-Christian authors of that time. These authors, who were hardly interested in the defense of Christianity, also confirm the historical reality of the Gospel's Jesus Christ.

Among them, a letter of the Syrian philosopher Mara bar Serapion to his son written from captivity at the end of the 1st – the beginning of the 2nd century, seems to be the earliest information about Jesus Christ. In this letter, he calls Christ a Wise Ruler, Whom Jews executed, but Who did not die – *“thanks to the new laws which He gave.”* (E. Barnicol, *Life of Jesus in the Perspective of Our Salvation*; also: Sergey Averintsev, *Stoic Life Wisdom of an Educated Syrian of Pre-Christian Era*)

An interesting witness about Christ is left by well-known Roman statesman and scholar Pliny the Younger (62- 114 AD) in his letter to Emperor Trajan. He wrote, among other things, that Christians *“gathered together before sunrise, usually on certain days; praised in singing Christ as God, and pledged not to commit crimes, but to refrain from theft, robbery, adultery, from breaking their word...”* (Letters by Pliny the Younger).

Another important witness about Christ comes from the story told by Roman historian Tacitus (55-120) about the fire of Rome in 64 during the rule of Emperor Neron (54-68 AD). The story says that *“Christ, from whom it (Christianity) got its name, was executed near Tiberias by Pontius Pilate; suppressed for some time, this harmful superstition has started again to break through and not only in Judaea, wherefrom this blastment comes, but also in Rome.”* (Tacitus, *Annals*)

Yet another witness comes from the famous Roman historian Suetonius (70-100 AD), who reported that *“Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) expelled from Rome Jews who had been excited by Christ.”* (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*). The banishment of Jews is also mentioned in the book of the Acts, saying that Apostle Paul on coming to Corinth found expelled Jews there, *“because Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome.”* (Acts, 18: 2)

Jewish historian Josephus Flavius also left a valuable witness about Jesus Christ in his book, *The Jewish Antiquities*, written about 93 AD: *“At that time (under Pontius Pilate) Jesus, a wise man who could hardly be called man, because he performed miraculous things, and who was teaching people that were happy and joyful perceiving the truth... He was Christ. And after Pilate, on the denunciation of our highly eminent men, judged him to death on the cross, they who used to love him did not leave him. And on the third day he appeared before them alive, just as God's prophets predicted these and many other things about Him. And the Christians, called so after Him, have not disappeared.”*

Further in the same work (Book 20, Chapter 9), Flavius talks about Apostle James: *The high priest Annas had Jesus' brother who was called James and some other men brought to court. They were accused of violating the law, and he (Annas) ordered them to be stoned.”* Flavius also speaks about St. John the Baptist, calling him a “righteous man,” and even about his execution by Herod, describing the destruction of Herod's troops shortly afterwards as *“God's punishment of Herod for the death of John.”* (Book 18, Chapter 5, 2)

All these witnesses show how “honest” the atheistic propaganda was announcing Christ to be a

myth.

Even more astounding is the survival of Christianity in the conditions of almost three-century-long imminent danger threatening with death everyone who was confessing Christ. Merciless persecutions of Christians began with the crucifying of Christ by Jews. After Judaea, Rome also passed punitive laws entailing horrible public executions of Christians that took place throughout the Empire. Christians were tortured, were thrown to wild beasts to be torn to pieces on circus arenas; they were crucified; they were tarred and tied to posts in parks and set on fire as darkness fell. These facts are described without any pity by such well-known historians of that time as Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Tacitus.

Since the time of Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD) Christians had been announced the followers of illegitimate religion (*religia illicita*) and were *“to be subjected to punishment.”* (see Bolotov, *Lectures of the History of the Early Church*). The Christians were in fact denied the right to live.

But amazing as it looks, a great number of people disregarding all such horrors, would accept Christianity with tortures and martyrdom that followed. No other religion in the world has given so many martyrs for faith. Justin the Philosopher wrote: *“Nobody had so deep trust in Socrates as to be ready to die for his teaching; but Christ, about Whom Socrates also had some knowledge, did receive... such trust!”*

How should we understand this stupendous and unique in the history of world regions fact? There are no natural explanations for it.

There is nothing left for us but to recognize that those multiple reports of the authors of those days (beginning with the authors of the New Testament) about the wonderful super-natural gifts received by the first Christians (healing of any possible diseases, prophecies of the future events, miracle works, including resurrection of the dead, immediately received knowledge of foreign languages, etc), as well as the remarkable courage and often joy experienced by Christians, including women and children, during tortures; spellbound spiritual and moral transformation of people at the baptism – all these facts witness to the Divine nature of this religion and to the Divinity of Jesus Christ. This is the only explanation of the fact why so many people accepted a faith the confession of which often entailed a martyr’s death.

Hegumen Nikon Vorobyev (died in 1963), who in the 1930s also had to suffer for his faith in the labor camps, wrote: *“Placing their hopes in Him (Christ) the apostles endured everything and they have overcome the world – a small flock of lambs has won victory over countless packs of wolves. Isn’t it proof of God’s power and providence?”* (**Hegumen Nikon**, *Letters about Spiritual Life*)

2. Spiritual and moral arguments

Christianity, unlike all other religions, offers a cardinally different understanding of the terms of man’s salvation. It teaches that salvation is not granted to man for a certain number of prayers said, of good-doings accomplished, or depending on how many sacrifices man has offered, or how many worships he conducted and heroic deeds committed. The salvation is granted for man’s realization of his sinfulness and sincere repentance. This is precisely why the first to reach the Kingdom of God was not a righteous man, but the one who committed serious crimes.

Christ clearly said: *"I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* (Mt 9:13). His approval goes not to "righteous Pharisee," but to repenting tax collector, who asked : *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner.* (Lk. 18:13) He gives forgiveness of sins not to a righteous Pharisee, who invited Jesus to dinner, but to a sinful woman who washed the Savior's feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair (Lk. 7:44) This wonderful teaching contains a challenge for all religions in the world, which grant salvation only to those who will fulfill all their prescriptions. Christianity has turned to be an anti-religious religion.

3. Doctrinal arguments

All Christian truths – about God-Love, Triune God, Logos as God's second Hypostasis, His coming in the flesh, about Christ crucified and Risen from the dead, etc. – are absolutely unique in content. They are very differing from those offered by Judaic religion of the Old Testament, as well as by all other religious and philosophic doctrines of the era of the emergence of Christianity. This remarkable fact involuntarily prompts one to ponder wherefrom could *the carpenter's Son, who has never learned* (Jn. 7:15; Mt. 13:55) and his disciples , *who were unlearned and ignorant men* (Acts 4:13) take so many absolutely new and wonderfully deep religious ideas? The answer is obvious: if there are no earthly sources for these ideas to come from, we cannot but admit the existence of the Divine source , which is God-Man Jesus Christ.

But what concretely are these Christian truths about? What is so unusual about them? Here, we will confine ourselves to discussing only the major of them, those that refer to the central truth – teaching about God.

- **General Comments on the Concept of God**

*When I talk about God, I am like a blind lion
in the search of water spring in a desert*

Maksimilian Voloshin

There is an idea attributed to the famous Ancient Greek philosopher Plato that *"Simple things are difficult for definition."* Indeed, a complicated phenomenon is possible to define by describing its characteristic features. A simple thing is easy to understand only for those who saw it. For example, how to explain what red color or sweet taste are to a person who has never seen red color and never tasted a sweet thing? Evidently, there is only one way for him to know – to see red color and to taste something sweet. No verbal description would help.

The Christian religion teaching presents God as the Original Simplicity, He is a Simple Being. Therefore any words and definitions to present Him would not be adequate. All the names and qualifications of God offered in the Holy Scriptures and in theological literature are nothing but only some earthly analogues of God's qualities. He is Spirit and not some subtle-material Being, which is why He cannot be described in a language and in concepts of our daily experience. St. Simeon the New Theologian wrote: *"I was shedding tears over the humankind, for looking for unusual evidence people will resort to human concepts and things and believe that they were depicting the Divine essence, the essence which none of the angels and none of the people was ever able to see and identify."* (St. Simeon the New Theologian, Divine Hymns)

However, these analogues are important, because the positive characteristics of God, such as Love, Reason, Personality, Justice, Holiness, enable the believers to make a clear distinction between good and evil, which is very important for them in their life. Otherwise all moral values of life are lost, and man's life would be en route to the senseless emptiness. According to Dmitriy Merezhkovskiy,

*Both good and evil are ways
To take us to one single goal;
So it does not matter which way to follow.*

However Christianity affirms the opposite: yes, *is does matter which way to follow*. St. Gregory Palamas offers a concise definition of one more aspect of the Christian teaching about God and the nature of His presence in the world. *"God is and is described as the essence of all living things, because everything is related to Him and because of this relation exists, but this relation does not make living things of one essence with God, but only partakers of His energies."* On the one hand, God is inseparable from and is not alien to the world and man; everything exists because of belonging to Him, but on the other hand, this belonging of the world to God and in God does not imply its being of one nature and of one essence with God. This explains why Christianity does not accept *deism*, which recognizes the existence of God, but sees Him only as the Creator of the world and its laws, but excludes any possible communion of man and world with God. *Deism* separates and alienates God from the world, making it a soulless object of man's consumer interests. Neither does Christianity accept *pantheism* fully identifying God with the world and denying Him Personality, which opens wide way for the emergence of all kinds of shamanism, witchery, magic, and occultism, arguing that it is possible for man to conquer the hidden (occult) forces of the *other* world and use them for his own purposes.

- **God is Love** (I Jn. 4:16)

One of the most important provisions of Christian perception of God that cardinaly makes it differ from all previous ideas about Him is the affirmation that *God is Love*. (I Jn. 4:8) He is not only the Super Reason and Fair Judge, some sort of a Super-powerful computer; He is not the Absolute Ruler, Who can do whatever He wants, but above all, He is *Love*! The Gospel says: *"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not only his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved,"* (Jn. 3:16-17). The voluntary Cross of Christ has shown the power of this love.

The Holy Scriptures and the works of the holy fathers often present God, as judging, punishing and pardoning. But according to the holy fathers, all these descriptions of God serve the pedagogical purpose only. St. John Chrysostom, for one, who during his homilies often spoke about God's anger, punishments and other similar "emotions," when explaining the dogmatic presentation of Him unambiguously said: *"When you hear the words 'fury and anger' in reference to God, do not interpret them in human terms – these are the words of leniency. All this is alien to the Divine Being; such words are said to bring the subject closer to the perception capacities of coarser people."* (St. John Chrysostom, Talk on Ps. VI.1). St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote: *"That it is indecent and improper to honor God's nature as subjected to any kind of passion - pleasure, mercy, or anger – nobody would question, even those who have little interest in learning the truth of His Being."* (St. Gregory of Nyssa,

Against Eunomius) St. John Cassian the Roman would use even stronger expressions, saying that *it is blasphemy to attribute to Him anger and rage.*" (St. John Casisan of Rome, *Philokalia*)

The Christian teaching about God-Love is unprecedented in the ancient world of the Judaic and Heathen perception of God. Therefore, without recognition of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God, the appearance of this teaching would be insoluble task.

- **One and three**

Credo, quia absurdum

The Gospel says that *God is a Spirit* (Jn. 4:24) and a personal Being, though in a specific sense of the word. The specificity consists in an absolutely new, differing from all pre-Christian perceptions, teaching about one God in three Hypostases (Persons).

The message of this teaching is that God is the eternal Father, His the pre-eternally begotten Son (Logos) and pre-eternally proceeding from the Father Holy Spirit. The three Hypostases are equal in honor, have one nature, one love, one reason, one will and one action. Analogues and images are helpful for the perception of this very unusual teaching of God.

Atom, for example, could help to understand how one thing at the same time can be multiple. The term "atom" with Greek thinkers (tomoj – indivisible) was used to denote a very simple and very small particle which combined together with others makes up complicated things. But in the 20th century it was discovered that there is a whole world within one atom. So also God, Who is One and Absolutely Simple – Undivided – Being, internally is of Three Hypostases.

Proceeding from the assumption that man is the image of God the teachers of the Church offer an analogy of *"man, the trinity" of which, our mind is an image of the Father; our word – an image of the Son, and our spirit – an image of the Holy Spirit... Mind cannot function without thought and thought without mind. That is why every thought has its respective spirit.*" (Ignatius Bryanchaninov, *On the Image and Likeness*)

The teaching about God the Trinity rejects all forms of pagan polytheism, especially tritheism (of three gods) and trimorphism (three different forms of expression of the mono-hypostatical /one-person/ God) The Christian Trinity is not a family *triad* of pagan pantheons in which Goddess-Mother is the second *"hypostasis."* There is neither male nor female source in the Holy Trinity. The Father (not mother) who begets, the Son (not a goddess) is the second Hypostasis; and the third Hypostasis, unknown to paganism, is the Holy Spirits (not a son or daughter). All the three Hypostases are equal in honor, unlike the members of the pagan triad. Therefore, besides the figure "three," these triads have nothing in common with the Holy Trinity.

The Cristian teaching about God in three Hypostases is unprecedented; no traces of it could be found in either religious or philosophic thinking. Isn't this fact a convincing proof to the unearthly origin of the Christian teaching, to its divine source – Christ?!

- **Christ – God and Man**

During the time of general demoralization, Christianity came out.

It rose in strong opposition to all religions that existed before it.

Friedrich Engels.

The biased critics of Christianity refer to the Heathen mythology as the source of Christian teaching about God's incarnation.

But about what kind of incarnations do the myths of the polytheistic religions of Greece, Rome, Phoenicia, India, etc. speak? They clearly say that gods do not in fact incarnate or re-incarnate, but depending on a concrete purpose take for some time various deceptive images, changing their masks, as actors do. Zeus, for example, turns into a bull, satyr, eagle, even in gold rain. Jupiter turns into a dragon (a winged serpent). *"Gods,"* Epicurus said, *"would not go as far as to become real people."* At the same time, however, mythology endows gods with all human passions, both lofty and romantic and very shameful ones. Krishna, for example, according to one story about him, had 8 wives and 16,000 concubines, from whom he had 180,000 sons.

So, even the most authoritative ideologists of atheism asserted that Christianity offered an absolutely new teaching about God's incarnation, unknown to the ancient world. Thus, Friedrich Engels, who once said that *"Christianity as a whole, except the final stone, was already made up"* in Philon's philosophy and in the cult of caesars, also said that *"the last stone in the edifice of Christianity was the teaching about the incarnation of the Logos, who became man, in a certain person, and about His redemptive sacrifice on the cross – to redeem the sinful mankind. But there are not trustworthy sources for us to know how this last stone was built into the philosophic theories of Stoic fathers."* One of the leading Soviet ideologist of atheism, Abram Ranovich, repeated after Engels: *"It is not so much important for us to find what is common between Christianity and Eastern cults, as to identify the specificity of Christianity as compared to Eastern cults close to it. This specificity consists in the teaching of incarnation."* (A. Ranovich, *Sources for Studies of the Social Roots of Christianity*)

The specificity is indeed remarkable, consisting in the following:

- Christianity teaches not about the incarnation of God, but of the Second Hypostasis of the One in essence Triune God – Logos.
- Christianity professes not an obscure, but real acceptance of human nature by the Son of God (Jn.1:1-34). Besides, the Divine and human natures of Christ are united in one Person of God-Man in a specific way. The two natures have not blended, forming some kind of a third person of half-god-half-man; they have not changed one the other; they have become inseparable in the God-Man's unity, and they formed an eternal one whole. Pagan mythology knows nothing of the kind.
- Christ, unlike mythological gods which had not historical roots, is a real historical personality, about whom there are many witnesses.
- His sufferings and death are not accidental and senseless, as was the experience of Adonis, Attis and Osiris, but were voluntary, sacrificial and accepted to serve a great purpose – *"to make men like gods and sons of God."* (St. Maxim the Confessor)
- Christ rose from the dead once and for ever. His resurrection is a guarantee and the beginning of the universal salvation.
- He was pure from passions; His astounding moral dignity is impressive. There is no

similar image to be found in mythology.

- Christ is no avatar of any other divine being, and in His turn, has no avatars either.
- God Logos is incarnated out of love to man, not for some earthy purposes, and the more so for some lustful pleasures.

Where has He come from, if before, there was nothing of His kind either in real history or in religious narrations? The image of Jesus Christ is not depicted by poets or philosophers, but by common fisherman, who with all their simplicity and sincerity described the last period of life of this outstanding Man and God. Are there any reasons not to believe them?

- **Crucified and Risen God the Savior**

We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness.

I Cor.1:23

Whom do we call a savior? The one who heals incurably sick persons, who gives bread to the hungry, who opens door to the strangers dying of cold, who frees captives from cruel slavery... Among saviors, there are military commanders and heroes who would die for their people; tsars and rulers, issuing just laws and uprooting arbitrariness of the powerful, who develop science, education, medical research, arts – all those who provide “bread and circuses.” Against the background of this undoubted for the materialistic consciousness reality, the Christian truth about the Savior looks strange and unacceptable: the Savior did nothing of the above-said for the people and he was crucified as a ruthless criminal.

How could the conviction of the believers in Christ emerge? In the history of religions there had been no teaching about God, Who by His own will accepted execution and death for the salvation of mankind. Psychologically speaking, this teaching is impossible to have emerged in human consciousness, insofar as it is absurd from the point of view of human ideas about the all-mighty God. However, since the very beginning of Christianity, despite horrible executions, this truth precisely – about Christ crucified and risen – has been the very essence of Christian proclamation.

This naturally inexplicable fact leaves only one real possibility to comprehend it: this truth comes from the Divine source, which is no other but Jesus Christ Himself.

WHY ORTHODOXY?

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free

Jn. 8:32

Christianity, like all other world religions, has suffered in its history through various splits and divisions that resulted in the formation of new organizations, some of which would radically distort the original faith and spiritual life of their followers. The most serious and well-known among these are Catholicism emerging in the 11th century and Protestantism that in the 16th century took away almost half of the Catholic followers. Eventually, only in the East, in Russia in particular, Christianity preserved most of its original features intact. The Churches confessing it have retained the “Orthodox” in their names.

What concretely makes Orthodoxy differ from other Christian denominations?

1. Holy Fathers' Foundation

Its main characteristic feature is a strict following the teaching of the Holy Fathers in understanding the Holy Scriptures and any truth of the faith and life. This feature is looked upon as the basic criterion of the truthfulness of Christian religion. This criterion rests on the fact that the saints precisely, because of their communion with the Holy Spirit, acquired the correct knowledge of Christ's teaching. Faithfulness to the legacy of the Holy Fathers has allowed Orthodoxy to preserve both the doctrine and the understanding of the spiritual life undistorted over the past two centuries.

A different picture presents itself in the non-Orthodox confessions.

2. Catholicism

Thus in Catholicism, the decisions of the Pope *ex cathedra*, that *"as such, not by the agreement of the Church are unchangeable"*, are truthful, and serve as the basic criterion of the truthfulness. It is possible to see how deeply this delusion has penetrated into the consciousness of the believers on the examples of the statements made by authoritative Catholic representatives.

Catarina of Siena (14th century), raised by Pope Paul VI to the highest rank of holiness - the Teachers of the Church - said to the ruler of Milan regarding the Pope: *"Even if he were Devil in flesh, I may not raise my head against him."* (Antonio Sicari, *Portraits of Saints*).

A well-known theologian of the 16th century, Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, reveals the essence of this "truth" in the following words: *"Even if the Pope had fallen into fallacy prescribing vices and prohibiting virtues, the Church, to avoid the transgression against conscience, would have to believe that vices are good, and virtues are evil. It ought to consider what he orders as good, and what he prohibits as evil."* (**Dmitriy Ogitskiy, Priest Maksim Kozlov, Orthodoxy and Western Christianity**)

It is clear what serious danger is concealed in such principle of the faith, when the truths of the faith and the laws of spiritual life of the Church are determined by one man, often irrespective of his spiritual and moral standing. The break of faithfulness to the Fathers of the Church by Catholicism could be found not only in the dogma on the Pope, but also in many other Catholic dogmas – on God and on the Church, on Man's Fall and God's Incarnation, on the Redemption and Justification, on the Original Sin, on Virgin Mary, on the Supererogation and Treasures of the Saints, on the Purgatory, on the Sacraments, etc.

But if this kind of dogmatic deviations of the Catholic Church might not be quite clear to many rank and file believers, its violations of the principles of the spiritual life and holiness are of immediate concern for every believer.

It would suffice to give a few examples from the life of most venerable Catholic saints to see where these deviations have brought them.

One of them, Francis of Assisi (13th c.), whose self-consciousness reveals itself from the following facts of his life. Once, Francis was zealously praying that God may grant him "two gifts of grace: *"One is that I may experience all the sufferings, that You, Sweetest Jesus, experienced in Your Holy*

Passions; and the second is that I may feel... that unabated love, that was burning in You, Son of God." This prayer of Francis is very revealing of his motivation. The prayer is not about his sinfulness or repentance or his humbleness, but about his unambiguous claims to "equal standing with Christ." As a result of this prayer, Francis did "feel full transformation into Jesus," and the painful, non-healing and bleeding wounds (stigmata) – the marks of "Jesus' passions -" did appear on his body. None of the Holy Fathers of the Church ever experienced similar psycho-physical symptoms.

This is what the "Holy Spirit" was saying to blessed Angela (14th c.): "My Daughter, My sweetest darling, I love you very much;" "I was with the apostles, and they saw me with their eyes, but they did not feel Me as you are feeling." This yet another Angela's revelation about herself: "I saw the Holy Trinity in the darkness, and inside the Holy Trinity which I saw in the darkness, I feel myself standing as if being its part." She expressed her attitude to Jesus Christ in the following words: "I was able to bring myself wholly into Jesus Christ;" or: "His sweetness and my grievance of His departure, made me cry and want to die." With these words she began to beat herself so fiercely that sisters had to carry her out of the church. (*Revelations of Blessed Angela*)

The "Teacher of the Church" Catarina of Siena (14th c.) presents no less telling example of the character of the Catholic holiness. She was 20 and "she felt her life was approaching an important turning point. She continued praying ardently to Her Jesus Christ, repeating one formulae of tenderness, one phrase that has become habitual to her: 'Let us get together in the marriage of the faith!'"

"Once Catarina had a vision, as if her Divine Bridegroom war embracing her bringing her closer to Himself, but then took her heart from her breast to exchange it for another one, looking more like His own."

"And the humble girl started sending out long letters all over the world, which she dictated with an amazing speed, faster than the secretaries were able to follow her, often three or four on different subjects simultaneously. All the letters concluded with an affectionate cliché, "Jesus the sweetest, Jesus – Love""

"The frequently used, 'I want' in Catarina's letters is very conspicuous. "Some say that she would address her resolute "I want" even to Christ." "Once she wrote to Pope Gregor y XI: 'I am writing to you on behalf of Christ... I tell you, father, in Jesus Christ.... Respond to the call of the Holy Spirit addressed to you.'" Addressing to the King of France, she said: "Fulfil God's and my will." (Antonio Sicari, *Portraits of the Saints*)

After his numerous apparitions "Christ" allegedly said to another "Teacher of the Church," Teresa de Avila , (16th c.): "From now on you will be My spouse...From now on, I am not only your Creator, God, but also your Spouse." "Oh, my Lord, for me it is either to suffer together with You or die for You," Teresa prayed to God and fell down utterly exhausted under these caresses..., " wrote Dmitriy Merezhkovskiy. Teresa admitted: "My Beloved is calling up my soul with so piercing whistle, that it is impossible not to hear it. The effect of this call on my soul renders it exhausted with desire." At her deathbed , she exclaimed: "Oh my God Spouse, I am going to see you at last!" Famous American psychologist William James, studying her mystical experience, said: "...her conception of religion is confined, if it can be said so, to an on-going flirtation between admirer and a divine idol." (William

James, *Variety of Religious Experience.*)

Teresa de Lisieux (Teresa Small or Teresa of Infant Jesus), who died at 23, also serves as a perfect illustration to the Catholic idea of holiness. Here are a few quotes from her spiritual autobiography, entitled as “A Story of One Soul.”

“During an interview preceding my taking of the veil, I spoke about what I was going to do in Carmel: ‘I came to save souls, and above all to pray for clergy.’” (Her purpose was not to seek her own salvation and not even praying for herself!)

Referring further to her humbleness, she wrote: *“I continue cherishing a daring hope that one day I will become a great saint... I thought that I was born for glory and had been seeking ways to achieve it. Now the Lord God has let me know that my glory will not be revealed to my mortal vision and that it would consist in my becoming a great saint!”* *“In the heart of my Mother Church, I will be Love... and then I will all things and in this way my dream will come true!”*

Teresa frankly says what kind of love this is: *“That was a kiss of love. I felt being loved and said: ‘I love You and entrust myself to You forever. There were neither applications, nor struggle, or sacrifices; Jesus and poor little Teresa have just looked at each other and understood everything... That day, there happened not just an exchange of glances, but a communion was established, when they were no longer two, and Teresa vanished, like a water drop lost the ocean depths.”*

This sweet love-story of a poor girl – a Teacher of the Catholic Church! – hardly needs any comment. She is not to blame, but the church that has brought her up in so much distorted vision of spiritual life is.

3. Protestantism

Another extreme, no less destructive, could be found in Protestantism. Having rejected the Oral Tradition of the Holy Fathers as a prerequisite for the preservation of the Church and its teaching and proclaimed only the Holy Scriptures (*sola Scriptura*) as the major principle of the faith of the Church, Protestantism lost the objective criterion of the truthfulness for the comprehension of both the Scriptures and any other Christian truth concerning faith and life. The Bible left for free interpretation of any man or any community loses its identity. Luther expressed clearly the “freedom” of Protestantism from the Holy Tradition, saying: *“I am not raising myself higher than others and do not think that I am better than Doctors and the councils, but I rank my Christ above any dogma and council.”* This subjectivism has become a mortal weapon of Protestantism. Having rejected the Holy Tradition of the Church, that is the teachings of the Holy Fathers, and relying exceptionally on individual understanding of the Holy Scriptures, Protestantism, from its very inception up to date has been breaking into dozens and hundreds of various branches, each of which places *its own Christ above any dogma and council*. The result often is full negation of the basic truths of Christianity.

St. Ignatius Bryanchaninov expressed the Orthodox position on this issue that is a serious stumbling block between Orthodoxy and Protestantism, like this: *“Do not think that reading of the Gospel without reading the works of the Holy Fathers would be enough for you. This is a very high-minded and very dangerous thought. It is better if the Holy Fathers bring you to the Gospel. Reading of the works of the Holy Fathers is the parent and tsar of all virtues. Holy Fathers’ writings teach us to*

comprehend the Holy Scriptures in a true light, to believe and to live righteously, in accordance with the commandments of the Gospel.” (St. Ignatius Bryanchaninov, *Ascetic Experience*). Unfortunately this advice was declined.

An expected consequence of the Protestant position was the unprecedented teaching on the salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*). Luther wrote: *“The sins of a believer, present, future and past, are forgiven, because these are hidden (tecta) or obscured (absconda) in the sight of God by the absolute righteousness of Christ and therefore are not used against the sinner. God does not want to incriminate our sins to us, but instead looks upon our righteousness and on the righteousness of the Other One, in Whom we believe - Christ.*

This teaching by excluding one of the most important ideas of Christ’s Good News, that *“the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force”* (Mt.11:12), in fact abolishes the spiritual life of Christians altogether.

Today, when the foundations of the Christian faith and moral principles of life are being broken, it is important to understand that Christianity is no sweet dreamy romanticism, nor is it unauthorized biblical debates, but a religion, which is striving for the communion with the all-holy God that can be achieved via repentance and struggle against passions. This is the only right way of life paved by the martyred feet and the joyous exploits of the holy men and women of the Orthodox Church.

WHAT DOES ORTHODOXY OFFER TO MAN?

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace...
Gal. 5:22

There are several points that are important to be mentioned in the context of the issue under discussion.

1. Man before God

Belief in God-Love completely changes man’s self-awareness in the world surrounding him, as well as his attitude to all hardships of life, diseases, and to death. He becomes aware that all happening in the world is not accidental, but all things occur in accordance with the Law of love, which is God. Therefore even the heaviest sufferings are accepted not as fatality or as an accidental happening, not as enemies’ intrigues, not as God’s unjust punishment, but as a result of man’s own violations of the laws of the spiritual and moral life. In all the situations of this kind God appears as the Healer Who is ready to help and does help, whatever changes of man’s spiritual state might happen. Any state in which man may find himself is brought about by man himself; and the primary cause is his treatment of the voice of conscience and of the Gospel’s commandments. Man can experience different states, even as different as two opposites. He might ignore the moral law, grudge all and everything, think and feel ill about all people; or he may feel very sorry for the sins he has committed, accept misfortunes as a deserved outcome of his behavior, and sincerely repent all his misdoings. So God’s reaction is also different. But believer knows that God is ready at any moment to give him what is best for his life, for his soul and body. God is not a Judge, or an executioner, but a loving Healer. This conviction is a consolation for man

making him stronger in the most difficult circumstances that may befall him in life.

2. An Ideal Man

Unlike all the imagery types of a perfect man, created and offered to us by literature, philosophy, and psychology, Christianity offers an image that is real and perfect. This is Jesus Christ. History shows that this Image has done a lot of good for many people who have been following Him in their life. People who wholeheartedly accepted Orthodoxy, especially those who reached the level of holiness in life have witnessed by their own life, better than all said words can, what Orthodoxy does to man, how it changes his soul and body, heart and mind, how it changes him into a bearer of love that has nothing in the world that would be higher or even match it. They opened to the world the God-like beauty of human soul and showed what truly spiritual perfectness is.

3. Freedom

Nothing is more tormenting for man than his own passions – irritation, anger, jealousy, wounded self-esteem, pride, greediness, drunkenness, etc. How is it possible to get rid of these awful enemies dwelling in human soul? Orthodoxy shows means for release from this slavery, revealing to man the laws of spiritual life. The knowledge of these laws and following them is a real way to a true happiness. As Apostle Paul said, *“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things, which God hath prepared for them who love him,”* (I Cor. 2:9) This way has been explored an innumerable number of times.

4. Laws of Life

Physicists, biologists, astronomers and many other explores of materialistic world are honored with all kinds of high orders, ranks, and glory, even for discoveries many of which are of no practical importance for people in their life. But the laws of man’s spiritual life with which he is in touch every hour and every minute are neglected and remain unknown, though their violations entail far more serious consequences than others. Orthodoxy reveals these laws.

Here are a few of them to serve as an example:

- Christ said: *“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”* (Mt. 6:33) The message is clear: only those who above all seek the truth and righteousness in their life will get not some sort of one-time or fast-going riches, power and glory, but real happiness both on earth and in the eternal life.
- The Gospel reads: *“...because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.”* (Mt.24:12) This truth establishes direct relation between man’s force of love and his moral state. Amorality (e.g. extra-marital, illegitimate relations between man and woman) is destructive for man’s feeling of love, and all other spiritual values along with it. One of the greatest psychiatrists of the 20th century, Carl Jung, also shared this view: *“Consciousness cannot get away with tolerating the triumph of amorality unpunished; there inevitably emerge very dark, mean and low instincts that not only mutilate man but may lead to psychic pathologies.”* (Carl Jung, *On the Psychology of the Unconscious*)
- *“Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself, shall be*

exalted." (Mt. 3:12) A person who demands being treated with a special honor and attention, who sees himself to be better and higher than other people, who boasts about his achievements, will be humiliated. Schema monk Ioann of Valaam wrote: *"It is a usual thing that when something is done with vainglory, the result will always be inglorious."* And vice versa: modesty, humility and humbleness always exalt man and arouse respect of the other people.

- *"How can you believe, which receive honor one of another?"* (In 5:44) This law points to the direct interdependence between man's Christian faith and the passions that emerge in his heart, especially such as aspiration for glory, honor and reward. Naturally, under "Christian faith" we mean not just formal acceptance of Christian truths that are also known to devils, but the pure life in accordance with the faith.
- St. Isaac of Syria formulated one more important law of the spiritual life like this: *"There is no way for the Divine love to emerge in one's soul, except via overcoming passions."* The point of discussion here is not a usual, natural feeling of love, not the feeling being in love with somebody, nor is it the feeling of compassion or pity for another person, or the feeling of justice and solidarity, that are experienced by all people who have not lost the feeling of kindness. This law speaks about a special deep state of love that is acquired via the purification of the soul from all sinful passions. St. Isaak described it as *"a warmest feeling of man's heart for entire creation, including men, birds, animals, and demons, when it is unendurable for him to hear or see any longer even minor harm being done to the creation. And when every hour he will offer a tearful prayer for both the voiceless and for the enemies of the truth alike, and for those who do him harm, felling a great heartfelt pity, which makes him God-like.... Those who have reached the perfection of this kind are identified by this feature: even if they were doomed to die at stake for their love for people ten times a day, they would not be consoled."*

5. Immortality

Note: offered below for discussion is one of the most complicated and debatable apologetic issues of the Christian Revelation, that on the one hand speaks about God-Love, Who has created man for a blissful life and Who in the Person of God-Man Christ has endured death on the Cross for the salvation of the whole world, and on the other – tells us about eternal tortures for the sinful.

Here, an attempt is made to analyze this problem on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and the works of the Holy Fathers; and to respond to the accusations of Christianity of a gloomy eschatology as if implying everlasting torturing of billions of the people of other faiths and of Christian sinners.

The Orthodox teaching about the immortality of human personality answers one of the most disturbing questions: *"The gift of life that's good for nothing, why are you given me?"*

The teaching affirms that life without belief in immortality cannot be of any value to man, and it often becomes a tragedy leading to suicide. Belief in eternal death renders life senseless. The tragedy of death becomes especially fearful for the people sharing this belief when they are parting forever with the loved ones, with their riches, glory and power.

Life on earth becomes valuable and fully meaningful, when seen as an important stage of man's existence, during which he can determine his future, his eternal being. Fyodor Dostoevsky said well in this regard: "...only with belief in his immortality, man is capable of comprehending his reasonable purpose on earth." "Without faith in his soul and its immortality, man's life is unnatural, unthinkable and unbearable."

What kind of immortality will that be? At this point, one more specific feature of the Orthodox faith comes to the front. It affirms that eternal life is being offered not only to the righteous people and to the saints, but also to big sinners.

What does this mean?

The Holy Scriptures and the Oral Tradition of the Church through the Holy Fathers, together with its liturgical legacy offer differing answers to this question. On the one hand, there are resolute statements that salvation is possible only for the righteous people. For example, according to the Gospel, "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels;" (Mt. 25:41) "and these shall go away into everlasting punishment." (Mt. 25:46) Or:

"But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost has never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation." (Mk. 3:29) Also: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." (Jn. 3:36)

Many Holy Fathers also spoke about never-ending agonies of the sinners. For example **St. Macarius of Egypt** (Macarius the Great) wrote: "... so also those who conceived sin in their heart and gave birth to children of lawlessness cannot on that day (Doomsday) escape the terrible all-devouring fire, but their souls and bodies together shall be convicted." (Macarius of Egypt, *Spiritual Homilies and Letters*.)

St. Gregory the Theologian : "But for us, when in danger of being deprived of the salvation of soul, the soul that is beatific and immortal, that will be either eternally punished for depravity or glorified for virtuousness – what feat is there for us to undertake?" (St. Gregory the Confessor, *Selected Works*)

St Maxim the Confessor: "Reward for feats of virtue is impassiveness and knowledge. Because these are the cause of the Kingdom of Heaven for us, just like passions and lack of knowledge are the cause of infinite agony." (St. Maxim the Confessor, *On Love*)

On the other hand, there are statements of firm belief that Christ "is the Savior of all men." (I Tim. 4:10)

Theological literature, for the most part, refers to the texts from the Holy Scriptures and of the Holy Fathers dealing with the former side of infinity. Its other side is little covered, and therefore the arguments in its favor are of particular interest.

These arguments could be divided into three groups, such as:

1. Conclusions from the Christian Revelation about God
2. Witnesses of the Holy Scriptures
3. Witnesses of the Fathers of the Church

• **Conclusions from the Christian Revelation about God**

What conclusions could be drawn from the New Testament's Revelation about God and His attitude to man? First of all, it must be pointed out as the central message of the Orthodox faith that salvation became possible exclusively thanks to the Sacrifice of Christ!

The uniqueness of the Christian teaching on this point is that, unlike pre-Christian religious convictions, it regards Love, not Reason or Justice, as the primary characteristic feature of God. Apostle Paul wrote in this regard, that *"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but he loved us, because that God sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* (I Jn. 4:10)

Hence – a serious question: is it possible for God-Love, who has given His Son to suffer for the sins of people, to give life to someone, who, He knows for sure, will choose evil and will be doomed to everlasting sufferings? A definite and uncompromising response came from one of the leaders of Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, Jean Calvin who declared, *that because the birth of people depends eventually on God, Who knows which of them will choose good and which – evil, but Who gave life to all of them, it means, that God has predetermined salvation for the former, and everlasting perish for the latter.*

But this argument was rejected by the Orthodox Church, because it came into contradiction with the primary Christian dogma about God-Love, Who set people free.

The argument of St. Isaac of Syria in this regard is this: *"If a man asserts that His long-endurance served only to tolerate them (the sinners) here only to torture them afterwards there, such a man blasphemes seriously against God."* *"The All-Merciful Lord has not created reasonable beings only to subject them mercilessly to infinite grievance – them, of whom he knew even before their creation what to expect, but whom he nevertheless has created."* (St. Isaac of Syria, *On Divine Mystery and on Spiritual Life*).

This is not a conclusion of just one man. The Holy Scriptures and many holy fathers repeatedly confirm this idea.

Witness of the Holy Scriptures

The Lord Jesus Christ promised: *"If be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."* (Jn. 12:32)

Apostles proclaim:

Apostle **John the Theologian**: *"He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."* (Jn. 2:2)

Apostle **Peter**: *"Christ...went and preached unto those in prison...which sometimes were disobedient" and perished during the flood at the time of Noah (I Pet. 3:19-20), "preached to them that are dead,"* (I Pet. 4:6), not only to the righteous. Since Christ by descending into hell has destroyed it His preaching became available to all dead until the end of the time.

Apostle **Paul**: *"Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life"* (Rom. 5:18)

"For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all." (Rom. 11:32)

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the first fruit; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death....And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under, that God may be all in all.” (I Cor. 15:22-28)

“When this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and all this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.” (I Cor. 15:54)

“Christ died for all.” (II Cor. 5:15)

“For therefore we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, specially of those that believe.” (I Tim.4:10)

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them (people); and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” (II Cor. 5:19)

“Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.” (Col. 2:14-15)

“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men. (Tit. 2:11)

Prophet Isaiah: *“And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.” (Is. 40:5)*

- **Witnesses of the Fathers of the Church**

The Holy Fathers also tackled this issue, and their conclusion, like that of the witnesses of the Revelation, was paradoxically differing. The Fathers also follow two different lines of the teaching regarding this issue. One points to the eternal existence of hell and everlasting torments awaiting the sinners, the other – to their finiteness. The text of the Matins of the Great and Holy Friday, among other things, speaks about the finiteness of hell in these words: *“By the Cross You tear the handwriting of our sins, O Lord, and are numbered among the dead, by Your resurrection You bind the tyrant, O, Lord Who love mankind, and deliver all from prison.”*

On **Great and Holy Saturday:** *“Hell reigns, but not for ever over the race of mortals.”* (Troparion, Ode 6)

On the **Easter:** *“By Your death You have destroyed the reign of death.”*

The message of this kind numerous affirmations that we hear during the divine services of the Holy Week and on the Easter and that are contained in Octoechos, Fasting Triodion and in Flowery Triodion, is this: death that hit man because of his fall is done away with by Christ. The Easter Homily is most triumphant, declaring, that *“by descending into Hell, Christ has **annihilated** it; Hell was **abolished... slain...overthrown...fettered in chains**. O Death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory? Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown! Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen! Christ is risen, and **not one dead remains in the grave.**”*

Holy Fathers of the Church also wrote about this.

St. Ambrosius Mediolanensis: *“A sinner after death will have to pass through fire, so as purified by fire he shall be saved and not suffer forever.”*

St. Amphilochius of Iconium: *“When He appeared in hell, He destroyed its tombs and emptied*

its depositories... and all were set free...light started shining and darkness was dispersed."

St. Athanasius the Great: *"He is that One, Who led the people out in the exodus from ancient Egypt, and in end all of us, or better to say the whole mankind, He redeemed from death and took out from hell."*

St. Gregory the Theologian: *"God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28) at the times of restitution of all things (Acts 3:21) when we, judging by our actions and passions now, either do not have God inside at all, or have but very little, will cease to be many things, but become wholly God-like, and have whole God and Him only inside. This is the perfection for which we aspire. Paul also hints to this time, when there will be "neither Greek, nor Jew.... but Christ is all and in all." (Col. 3:11)*

St. Gregory of Nyssa: *after evil is removed from all creatures, the God-like beauty will shine again in all things, the beauty after the likeness of which we were created at the beginning.*

St. Epiphanius of Cyprus: *Christ, Who has suffered for us... descended into the hell to crush the adamant locks... He led captive souls out and made the hell empty.*

Many other holy fathers say the same.

St. Ephraim of Syria has no doubt that *"In God's say (during descending into hell) hell got warning to be prepared for His subsequent say (during His Second coming), that will completely demolish it."*

St. John of the Ladder (Climacus): *"God belongs to all free beings. He is the life of all, the salvation of all – faithful and unfaithful, just and unjust, pious and impious, passionate and dispassionate..." "for there is no respect of persons with God" (Rom. 2:11) (St. John Climacus, Step 1.3)*

Further on St John wrote: *"It is impossible for all to become dispassionate, but it is not impossible for all to be saved and reconciled to God."* (Step 26.82)

St. Isaac of Syria: *"The sinner is unable to comprehend the grace of his resurrection. Where is gehenna, that can afflict us? Where is perdition, that terrifies us in many ways and quenches the joy of His love? And what is gehenna as compared with the grace of His resurrection, when He will raise us from Hades and cause our corruptible nature to be clad in incorruption, and raise up in glory him that has fallen into Hades? That grace whereby we are resurrected after we have sinned is greater than the grace which brought us into being when we were not."*

St. Maximus the Confessor: *"Then, with the time, the damaged strength of the soul will throw away the memory of evil that was enrooted in the soul, and approaching the end of the times and on finding no rest, the soul will come to God, Who has no end; and in this way, thanks to knowledge and not to good done, the soul will get its strength back and will be restored (apokatasthnai) in its original state, and then it becomes clear that Creator never had anything to do with sin." (Brian E. Daley, Apokatastasis and "Honorable Silence" in the Eschatology of St. Maximus the Confessor)*

St. Elder Siluan of Mt. Athos: *"We should think of only one thing – that all people may have salvation." (Archimandrite Sophronius (Sakharov), St. Elder Siluan of Mt. Athos). Once a hermit-monk said to him that "God would punish all atheists. They will burn in an eternal flame." The hermit-monk seemed to feel deep satisfaction that they would be punished by eternal fire. Elder Siluan, feeling worry, asked the monk: "Tell me please, if you are placed in heaven and from there you see others burning in hellish flames, would you remain detached?" "What can you do – it was their own fault," countered the monk. The Elder, deeply sorrowful, answered: "Love cannot accept that...Everyone must be prayed for."*

Such are witnesses left to us by the Holy Fathers. It is unthinkable to assume that apostles, saints

and righteous elders who reached the heights of spiritual perfection, would not understand the teaching of Christ, or -which would be an “unspeakable blasphemy” - that they consciously opposed Christ and would teach about the finite sufferings of the *disobedient* and spiritually *dead*, as Apostle Peter put it. At the same time, it is known, that many holy fathers also wrote about the eternity of sufferings.

Indeed, both in the Scriptures and in the works of the Holy Fathers, many questions related to the understanding of *that* world – about God, His characteristic features and His attitude to man, as well as about the ultimate lot of the sinners, and other questions - are often presented from diametrically opposite perspectives. How can this fact be explained? An apparent explanation is that our consciousness in its present state is unable to comprehend the realities of *that* world. It encounters insurmountable obstacles for the language of earthly concepts to describe those realities. That is why a single clearly worded teaching about the eternal lot of mankind is absent both in the Tradition of the Holy Fathers and in the Holy Scriptures. It remains a mystery for us, just like many other features of that world.

Saints speak about the nature of these mysteries in quite concrete terms.

Apostle **Paul** wrote that someone “*was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which is not lawful for a man to utter.*” (II Cor. 12:4) **St. Symeon the New Theologian** offered a similar explanation: “*... people using human concepts, things and words, believe that they depict God’s divine nature, the nature, which none of the angels and none of men could see and give a name to.*” (St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns*) But since it is impossible not to speak about God and His providence about man, because this is the foundation on which the whole Christian religion stands, there inevitably emerge paradoxes, which are often identified as contradictory judgments.

For example, in the Bible and in the works of the Holy Fathers, we repeatedly come across passages about God’s anger, His punishments, even about His revenge to the sinners. At the same time, however, the same Holy Fathers said opposite things. For instance, **St. Anthony the Great** wrote: “*When we live virtuously, we are God’s own, and when we become wicked, we fall away from Him. This does not mean that He is angry with us, but that our sins do not let God shine in us, and that they link us with the tormentors – the demons.*” (Texts on Holy Life by St. Anthony the Great, *Philokalia*)

St. John Cassian of Rome used even stronger words to say, that “*God cannot be insulted or irritated by people’s lawless acts...*” (St. John Cassian, *Conferences XI, para.6*) “*Without blaspheming, one cannot attribute anger and fury to Him.*” (Philokalia, vol. 2)

Another reason of this kind of duality is that the saints always considered doing spiritual good for people as the primary purpose of their homilies, and therefore used a language corresponding to their individual level of development. They were very clear explaining this duality.

In this connection, **St. Gregory of Nyssa** wrote: “*Considering our capabilities, the providence of God accommodates to our weakness so that people disposed to sin should keep themselves off evil-doing out of fear of punishment, and those who sinned before, should not despair and lose hope for returning through repentance.*” (St. Gregoy of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*). **St. John Chrysostom’s** explanation is this: “*When you hear the words ‘fury and anger’ in reference to God, do not interpret them in human terms – these are the words of leniency. All this is alien to the Divine Being; such*

words are said to bring the subject closer to the perception capability of coarser people.” (St. John Chrysostom, Talk on Ps.6:1)

Similar duality is found in the judgments of the saints about eternal torments. Here we encounter the same fact when many Fathers, who very definitely spoke about the finiteness of hell, on other occasions would speak and write about eternal torments of the sinners. Most prominently their latter position came out during their homilies, when they addressed “*coarser people.*” In those cases the duality was in full correspondence with the witnesses of the Scriptures. Here are a few examples:

St. Ephraim of Syria, asserting that the Lord will “*completely destroy*” hell, at the same time wrote this: He “*will raise the righteous to the heaven, but He will plunge the dishonest people into gehenna.*” (St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Psalter*)

St. John Chrysostom, who said that that the descent of Christ made “*heaven out of hell,*” in another place was dwelling that “*the sinners are to be clothed in immortality, though not the glory, but to have a constant fellow of the torments there.*” (St. John Chrysostom, *Works. Admonition for Theodore After His Fall*)

St. Ignatius (Bryanchaninov), who expressed conviction that “*...pagans, Muslims, and other persons following false religions, from now on are the property of hell and are deprived of any hope for salvation,*” (St. Ignatius (Bryanchaninov), *Works, vol III.*) also wrote that those “*deprived of the glory of Christianity, are not deprived of other glory that was granted them at the creation: they are God’s image.*” But about what kind of glory of those subjected to everlasting torments in hell, can one talk?

St. Theophan the Recluse (Govorov), who said that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs only to the Christians who lead a righteous life, interpreting the words of Apostle Paul that *God will be all in all* (I Cor. 15:22-28) wrote: *...everywhere human nature is deified by Christ, so that He may lay the way for the restoration of all people in the world... and through this resurrection the ultimate restoration of the fallen mankind be accomplished, and He appear in glory that is due to Him.* (St. Theophan the Recluse, *Interpretation of the First Epistle of Apostle Paul to Corinthians*).

None of the Councils of the Church - in particular the Fifth Ecumenical Council of 553 when Origen’s pagan teaching was justly anathematized - would denounce either Gregory of Nyssa, or Athanasius the Great and Ephraim of Syria, as well as other Fathers; even their works and worship books containing the idea of a complete destruction of hell by Christ’s sacrifice were not denounced.

The “*antinomy of gehenna*” - this is how Father Pavel Florenskiy has called this controversy of the Scriptures and of the Holy Fathers concerning the problem of hell. Many Russian Orthodox thinkers, such as Aleksandr Tuberovskiy, priest Anatoliy Zhurakovskiy, priest Pavel Florenskiy, archpriest Sergiy Bulgakov, Yevgeniy Trubetskoy, Vasiliy Ekzemplyarskiy, Nikolay Fedorov and others, attempted to solve this problem. The conclusion from all their studies was aptly drawn by Nikolay Berdyaev, saying that the problem of hell “*is utmost mystery not susceptible to rationalization.*” (Nikolay Berdyaev, *On Man’s Destination. Experience of Paradoxical Ethics.*)

The second important question arising from the idea of the finiteness of hell is whether the

significance of the Orthodox faith and all moral values become unimportant: if all are to be saved, does it matter how to live?

The teaching of the Church clearly affirms that after the death of the body, human soul enters the world of eternity, which will let out *“passions that are one thousand times stronger than on earth; they would fire you without a possibility to calm them down,”* (Hegumen Nikon Vorobyev, *Letters to Spiritual Children*) because it is soul, not body, that is a source of passions. The roots of our passions are in our free will. (St. Gregory of Nyssa). The Lord himself said: *“...those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man.”* (Mt. 15:18-20) Even the most brutish bodily passions are rooted in the soul, and because of that they do not disappear after the death of the body; and with them, man enters *that* world.

How do the enduring passions display themselves *there*? Why are they *one thousand times stronger there*? This is easy to understand. Here, on earth, passions do not have unlimited freedom of expression. People, circumstances, health conditions interfere... Or a man falls asleep, and the passions calm down. In the earthly life, under the bodily cover, passions do not act with all their strength. But *there*, released from the body, they reveal their ferocious nature in full. Nothing is impeding them *there*: there is no sleeping, getting tired, no entertaining *there*. In addition, the passionate soul is easily lured by evil spirits that would stir up and strengthen manifold the power of passions. The experience of the ascetics in encountering demons shows that demons are inexpressibly foul, horrible and repulsive. Hegumen Nikon (Vorobyev) said that *“at the very sight of them, man can go out of his mind.”* (Hegumen Nikon Vorobyev, *Letters to Spiritual Children*). And if a person is overwhelmed with passions, it is difficult to imagine what torments might await him in the eternal life. Because man after death is deprived of will, his soul loses every possibility to slake the passions and escape the repulsive demons.

A beforehand warning offered to man by Orthodoxy is that *“every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.”* (I Cor. 3:13-15) This image shows that salvation could be different.

What do the words *“yet so as by fire”* imply? Only those who never burned themselves and did not see heavily burned people can think lightly of that. People who ever found themselves caught by fire had experienced the harshest possible pain. None of them for any promises whatsoever would agree to be subjected to fire again. Burning at stake was always considered the most horrible execution. The Apostle using this image wanted to show the horror of the sufferings awaiting a person who had built the house of his/her life of passions and vices – *of wood, hay, stubble* (I Cor. 3:12). Even if that person may be saved, but what kind that salvation would be? *“Yet so as by fire?”* If only this lone thought were to take root in human consciousness, many, not doubt, would take a different attitude to their life.

Orthodoxy, as a religion of love, warns man: you are immortal, and when it is not late, when you still have time, live in conformity with your conscience and truth, do not sin, undertake every effort

for improvement and for washing out your sins by repentance *here* so that *there* you may escape inevitable sufferings, and not just escape them, but at the same time become a son of God in grace and glory, in light and everlasting felicity.

Orthodoxy shows the correct way of life by commandments and spiritual laws, outlines the highest goal of life— deification of man ; and offers unique means of support – sacraments.

Christians are very fortunate to know this and be able to get ready for the eternal life. But what a terrifying reality awaits those who do not believe in eternal life, goodness and truth!

Therefore a thoughtless attitude to posthumous sufferings on grounds that they will not be everlasting, that ultimately salvation will come, is nothing but astounding stupidity. For what reward would such “bold spirit” agree to sit in the fire for at least several minutes? Would he not give anything to get release from the unbearable torture?!

So, it does matter how to live now. St. Isaac of Syria warns: *“Let us beware in ourselves, my beloved, and realize that even if Gehenna is subject to a limit, the taste of its experience is terrible, and the extent of its bounds escapes our very understanding.”* (St. Isaac of Syria, *On Divine Mysteries and on Spiritual Life*)

So, the teaching about the complete and final destruction of hell by the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, contained in the writings of the saints, such as Ambrosius Mediolanensis, Amphilochius of Iconium, Athanasius the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, Epiphanius of Cyprus, Ephraim of Syria, John Chrysostm, John of the Ladder, Isaac of Syria, Maximus the Confessor and other holy Fathers, and that are to be found in numerous texts of divine services, are not a mere collection of private opinions, but is a teaching as Orthodox, as Orthodox is the teaching of the Church Fathers, who asserted quite the opposite.

It is evident that the Christian teaching about God does not have an earthly origin. It has revealed to mankind that the images of God that man used to have before were either not complete (as in the Judaism of the Old Testament) or deeply distorted (as in Heathen religions and philosophy), that all of these were based on the anthropomorphic ideas about Him.

Christianity teaches that God is NOT:

- a pagan blindfolded Themis , impartially passing decisions on awards or punishments for each man;
- a creator who has just created the world and then resigned from any involvement in it;
- a tsar who reigns in the world as he wills;
- a spirit that realizes itself only through man;
- an impersonal mysterious (occult) force through the penetration into which and on learning its laws one may acquire limitless power over people, nature and entire world;
- a boundless ocean of spirit in which human being, having reached internal freedom, is dissolved, like a saline puppet.

Christianity reveals that God IS;

- a Three-Hypostatic Unity;

- Love that is boundless and that has given man absolute moral freedom;
- Incarnate second Hypostasis of Triune God, Christ, Who has voluntarily accepted Cross for the sake of people;
- Savior, healing everyone appealing to Him, regardless of how sinful the person appealing to Him might be;
- The God that “will be all in all” (I Cor. 15:28)

Translated by Natalya Chernykh