

Orthodoxy: The hope of the people of Europe (Abbot Georgios Kapsanis of Gregoriou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



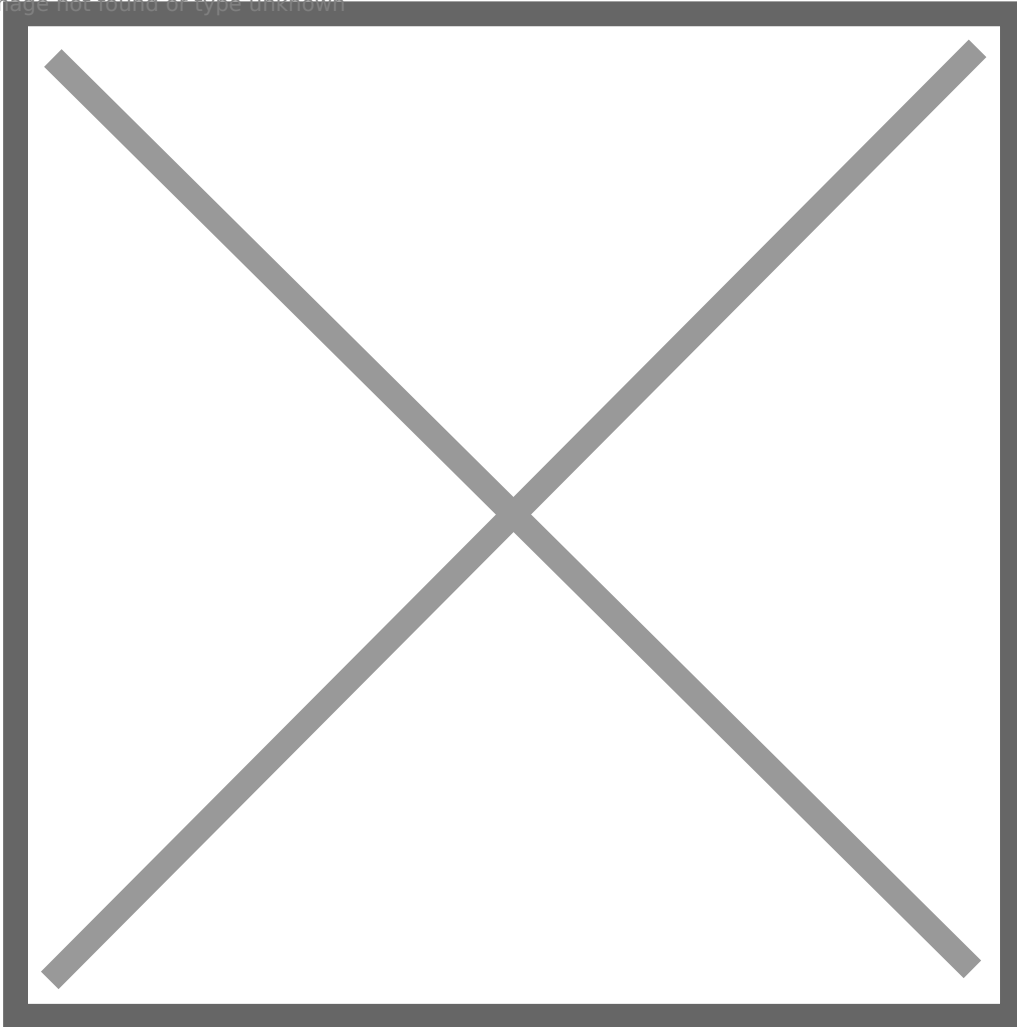
Our awareness of ourselves as Orthodox Christians does not permit us to overlook the fact that Orthodoxy and Western Christianity cannot share a single ‘Christian identity’. On the contrary, it compels us to stress the fact that Orthodoxy is Europe’s long-forgotten original Christian faith, which at some point should once again serve as the basis of its Christian identity.

The United Europe of the twenty-first century is striving to find its identity. The question of ‘European identity’ did not use to be a serious concern since it was originally shaped only by economic and political factors. However, from the moment that cultural and particularly religious factors had to be taken into account in the attempt to define it, there have been serious debates, sharp disagreements

and bitter disputes over the question of whether the 'European Constitution' should make any reference to Europe's Christian identity.

But what does the 'Christian identity of Europe' mean to our Orthodox peoples? How Christian is the 'Christian identity of Europe'?

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All those well-meaning individuals who are striving to strengthen the concept of Europe's Christian identity usually speak of it as if it were an historical fact or a code of Christian principles and values that the Christian peoples of Europe can jointly adhere to through the aid of ecumenical contacts and inter-Christian dialogues. The Christians of Europe want to see the concept enshrined in Europe's institutional framework because they are afraid that their continent's religious identity might be weakened and its Christian character adulterated as a result of population changes (migration etc.), or that Christian 'inter-church' organisations might be excluded from the European centres of decision-making. Following the same logic, even the proposals of official Orthodox representatives focus on strengthening an institutional Christian presence in Europe.

The Orthodox Church

Living as I do in the environment of Mount Athos and the spiritual climate that it creates, I can see that our Orthodox heritage should not be measured by the standards of this world. In recent years I have witnessed the piety and deep faith of the pilgrims visiting Athos, many of whom come at the cost of great effort and expense from the Balkan countries and from Russia.

In the minds of all these pious Orthodox Christians and of all those they represent back in their home countries, Orthodoxy does not usually mean the same thing as it does to those who view it or regard it with ideological or sociological criteria – those people who usually see anti-Western ‘Orthodox crescents’ here in the Orthodox East similar to those in the Moslem world, or regard Orthodoxy as a nationalistic force in the peoples that embrace it. No matter how much we Orthodox create such impressions as a result of our personal failings or collective errors, we deeply believe that Orthodoxy is something much more substantial, sublime and imperishable: it is the priceless gift of the Holy Triune God to the world, the ‘faith entrusted once for all to the saints’ (Jude 3), which our Orthodox Church preserves in its fullness, free of heretical distortions, and which we have conserved through difficult times in order not to lose our hope of eternal life.

We Orthodox peoples have been deemed worthy by God in His mercy to bear the seal of Orthodox Holy Baptism, to partake in the Orthodox Holy Eucharist, to follow humbly the doctrinal teachings of the seven Ecumenical Councils as the only way to salvation, and to keep ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4: 3). We do indeed bear the legacy of the Orthodox Faith ‘in jars of clay’ (II Corinthians 4: 7), yet by the grace of God this represents the reason for ‘the hope that is in us’ (I Peter 3: 5).

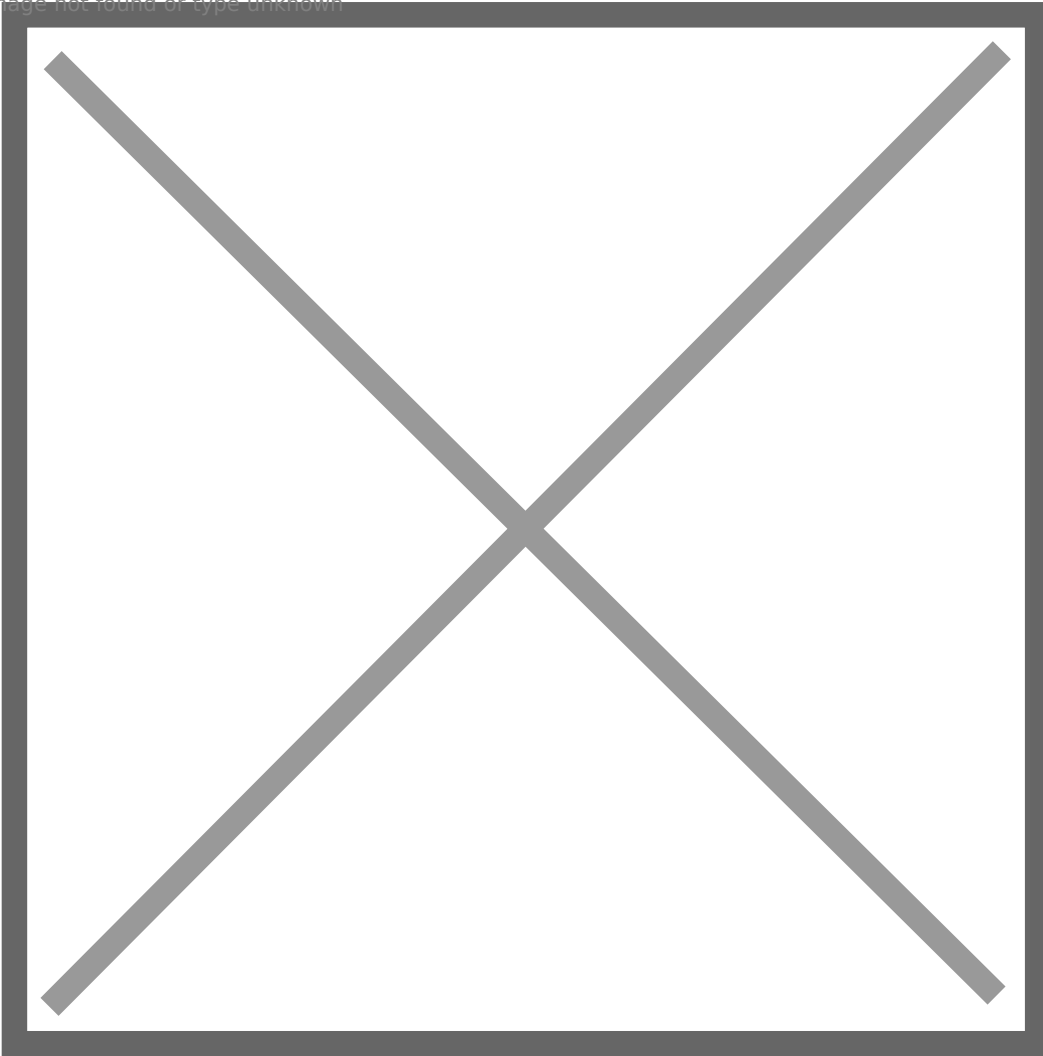
Our Orthodox Church is not merely an ark of our national historical heritage. It is first and foremost the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

So as not to lose the hope of their eternal salvation in Christ the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans preserved their Orthodox faith through the sacrifices of thousands of neo-martyrs, who withstood both conversion to Islam and conversion to the Uniate Church.¹ For this reason, the recent resurgence of the Uniates that has occurred since the collapse of the atheist regimes, together with the active proselytising of neo-Protestant denominations among Orthodox populations, represent serious challenges to the Orthodox. And as such they should be faced because once again they jeopardise the salvation of simple souls ‘for whom Christ

died' (cf. Romans 14: 15).

In the traditionally Roman Catholic and Protestant societies of the West, moreover, where Orthodox parishes exist and operate, the Orthodox presence should be a humble witness to authentic Christianity, which these societies have been deprived of for centuries due to the papal and Protestant deviations from the Apostolic Faith. Each time that the nostalgic search for the pure, unadulterated form of the Christian faith culminates in the return of heterodox Christians to the embrace of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church, the missionary character of the Church is expressed. In returning to the Orthodox Church, Christians of other denominations do not abandon one church in order to embrace another, as many mistakenly believe. In reality they leave an anthropocentric form of church and rediscover the one and only Church of Christ, they become members of the Body of Christ and are put back on the road to deification.

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The Holy Monastery of Gregoriou on Mount Athos

Theology and 'theology'...

Unfortunately, ecumenism, that syncretistic philosophy expressed by institutional organs of the so-called Ecumenical Movement and representatives of papocentric ecumenism, is heading in the opposite direction. As they ignore Orthodox ecclesiology and follow the Protestant 'Branch Theory' or the recent Rome-centred theory of 'sister churches', they believe that the Truth of the Apostolic Faith, or part of it, is preserved in all Christian churches and denominations. This is why they direct their efforts towards achieving a visible unity amongst Christians, regardless of the deeper unity of the Faith.

In this sense ecumenist 'theology' equates Orthodox Baptism (threefold immersion) with the Roman Catholic rite of aspersion, regards the Filioque heresy as doctrinally equal to the Orthodox teaching on the procession of the Holy Spirit only from the Father, interprets the Pope of Rome's primacy of authority as a primacy of service, and views as a *theologoumenon* (theological opinion) the

Orthodox teaching on the distinction between God's essence and energies and God's uncreated grace.

This is a superficial ecumenism, about which the late departed Father Dumitru Staniloae aptly wrote: 'Every now and then, out of the great desire for unity, a facile enthusiasm emerges, which believes that reality can be relatively easily transformed and reshaped by strength of feeling. A diplomatic and conciliatory mentality also emerges, which believes that doctrinal positions or other more general problems that keep the churches apart can be reconciled through mutual concessions. These two ways of dealing with - or ignoring - reality display a certain elasticity in, or tendency to relativise, the value they attribute to some of the churches' articles of faith. This tendency to relativise perhaps reflects the very low importance that certain Christian groups - either in part or in whole - attach to these articles of faith. Out of enthusiasm or their diplomatic mentality, they propose deals or compromises on these articles of faith precisely because they have nothing to lose with what they are proposing. These compromises, however, represent a great danger to churches in which the relevant articles are of utmost importance. To these churches, proposals regarding deals and compromises of this kind amount to undisguised attacks'.²

At the same time, the Protestant denominations, which have gone so far as to deny certain fundamental doctrines of the Faith (the historicity of the Resurrection, the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God, etc.) and to accept practices that are counter to the spirit of the Gospels (marriage between homosexuals), are accorded equal status on the panels of the World Council of Churches with the most-holy local Orthodox Churches. The theory of the 'demythologisation', 'theology' or 'death' of God, the ordination of women priests, and the celebration of homosexual marriages by priests certainly do not form part of our Christian identity.

Protestantism is experiencing a profound crisis of faith. In his book *Dancing Alone: The Quest for Orthodox Faith in the Age of False Religion* (Regina Orthodox Press, Salisbury, USA), Frank Schaeffer, the well-known American Protestant who became Orthodox after a long and arduous personal quest, provides a lot of interesting information showing how far Protestantism has fallen away from the Truth of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Inter-religious syncretism

A logical extension and inevitable consequence of inter-Christian syncretism is inter-religious syncretism, which recognises the possibility of salvation for anyone belonging to one of the monotheistic religions. An Orthodox bishop has written

that: 'at bottom, both churches and temples (mosques) aim to enable man to achieve the same spiritual self-fulfilment'.³ Inter-religious syncretism does not even hesitate to recognise paths to salvation in all of the world's religions.⁴

A few years ago a professor at Athens University wrote that he could light a candle before an icon of the Virgin Mary just as easily as he could light one before a statue of a Hindu goddess.

Orthodox bishops, clergy and theologians have, unfortunately, been influenced by the syncretistic mentality. Through their theological views, which worldly rulers and intellectuals usually listen to and recognise as Orthodox, they help this mentality, which is initially a matter of purely personal opinion, to become an official 'line' with specific goals and objectives. From this point of view, love, without reference to doctrinal truth, becomes the main criterion of Christian unity, while insistence on traditional Orthodox theological positions is denounced as bigotry and fundamentalism.

As for how the ecumenist mentality can construct a superficially Christian identity for Europe, the 'commitments' made by the representatives of the Christian churches who signed the Ecumenical Charter on 22 April 2001 are characteristic.⁵

The true identity

Yet this 'Christian' European identity is a far cry from the true Christian identity of the peoples of Europe. It cannot be too highly stressed that we do Europe a grave injustice when we ascribe an identity to her that is not truly but only superficially Christian. A morbid, adulterated form of Christianity is not the Christianity of the catacombs in Rome, of St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, of the Orthodox monks of Scotland and Ireland, or of Christendom as a whole in the first millennium. An adulterated form of Christianity cannot protect Europe's societies from an invasion of non-Christian ideas and morals.

It is already a well-known fact that many Europeans have grown tired of sterile rationalism and long for a lost mysticism, and this is why they are embracing Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism, turning to esoteric religions or seeking metaphysical experiences in New Age movements. In Italy alone there are about 500 mosques in operation, while in France 5% of the population is Moslem.

The Orthodox Church holds the Truth. It has Christ at its centre. Everything in it is theanthropic because everything that is offered up to the Lord, the Theanthropos, is filled with the uncreated Grace of the Holy Spirit. This is why it can provide comfort and relief to those souls who earnestly seek release from the suffocating

grip of rationalism, scientism, materialism, idealism and technocracy. This is why Orthodoxy should not be dragged into the syncretistic melting-pot, and why the hope of the whole world should not be lost!

As Orthodox pastors and Orthodox believers we have a duty to preserve the sacred legacy of our Orthodox faith. St. Paul exhorts both the elders at Ephesus and our own Church leaders today to 'keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood' (Acts 20: 28). And to the faithful in Thessalonica and the Church as a whole he said: '...stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you' (II Thessalonians 2: 15).

A healthy ecumenism

In the sphere of faith the 'Old Continent' has gone astray. The New Age is now openly threatening to de-Christianise European society. There is nothing strange about this. Europe has turned its back on Christ, and at some point banished Him, as Dostoevsky aptly observes in 'The Grand Inquisitor'⁶, and the holy Bishop Nicholas of Ochrid and Zitsa also notes.⁷

The Orthodox Church must reveal its gift and mission; it must proclaim to the peoples of Europe that, if there is something that can save Europe at this critical phase of its history, it is Orthodoxy. Let us ourselves not deprive our Orthodox Church of the opportunity to give this message of salvation to the peoples of Europe by placing the Orthodox Faith on the same par as heresy in the confused perspective and vague vision of syncretistic ecumenism. We can contribute to a healthy, entirely Orthodox form of ecumenism by revealing the mystery of the Theanthropos and His Church to Christians of other denominations and by proclaiming with the late Elder Justin Popovitch, confessor of the Faith:

'The way out from all the impasses - of humanism, ecumenism and papism - is the historical figure of the Theanthropos, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and His historic theanthropic creation, the Church, of which He is the eternal head, while the Church is His eternal Body. The Apostolic, Catholic and Orthodox Faith of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the Holy Church Fathers and Holy Tradition is the remedy that can restore to new life the member of any heresy, whatever its name. In the final analysis, all heresies are created by man and "after the manner of man"; each of them puts man in the place of the Theanthropos, or replaces the Theanthropos with man, and in so doing denies and rejects the Church... The only way to salvation from this predicament is the Apostolic and Theanthropic Faith, that is to say, a complete return to the theanthropic way of the Holy Apostles and the Holy Church

Fathers. This means a return to their immaculate Orthodox faith and to Christ the Theanthropos, to their blessed theanthropic life in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit, to their freedom in Christ... Otherwise, without the way of the Holy Apostles and the Holy Church Fathers, without following the course charted by them to serve the one true God in all worlds, without worshipping the one true and immortal God, Christ the Theanthropos and Saviour, man is bound to flounder in the dead sea of civilised European idolatry and, instead of the True and Living God, he is bound to worship the false gods of this age, in which there is no salvation, no resurrection and no means of deification for the sad creature called man.’⁸

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2. Dumitru Staniloae, *Gia enan Orthodoxo Oikoumenismo* (Towards an Orthodox Ecumenism), Athos Pubs., Piraeus, 1976, pp. 19-20.
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5. See the journal *Apostolos Varnavas*, Nicosia, Cyprus, no. 10, 2001, pp. 411-23.
6. F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*.
7. Archimandrite Justin Popovitch, *Orthodoxos Ekklisia kai Oikoumenismos* (The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism), Orthodoxos Kypseli, Thessaloniki 1974, p. 238 and pp. 251-52.
8. *Loc. cit.*

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