

STUDY PAPER FIVE

Holiness in the Orthodox Tradition by the editor.

The word "Orthodox," from the Greek word *orthodoxia*, means both "right belief" and "right glory" or "worship." In Orthodoxy faith and worship are intimately linked. According to the maxim of a fourth-century monk, Evagrius of Pontus, "a theologian is one who prays truly." Orthodoxy is by very definition an experiential faith. It is not a set of rational beliefs, held more or less abstractly, but an all-encompassing way of life. For Orthodoxy, the touchstone of this life and faith is her liturgy, her corporate and public worship. Her worship has never lost its direct continuity with the worship of the ancient Church; the central hymn of the Church's service of evening prayer was referred to by St Basil the Great in the fourth century as being so ancient that no one remembered who composed it. Orthodoxy experiences this liturgical faithfulness as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Far from being a lifeless adherence to the past, her liturgy is a miraculous wellspring of the inspiration which God has bestowed on generations of faithful men and women: prophets and poets, ascetics and visionaries. Orthodox liturgy binds together the whole people of God, living and departed, present, past and future, into the communion of love which is the very life of the Holy Trinity. This hallowed world of prayer is a world of unparalleled depth and beauty, a world within which countless Orthodox have found "the one thing needful," and have reached the heights of spiritual life. When in the tenth century envoys of Great Prince Vladimir of Kiev first experienced the Divine Liturgy in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, they reported that they did not know if they were in heaven or on earth. An open heart can experience this heavenly beauty, this living, mysterious presence of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, even in the humblest parish church.

What distinguishes the Orthodox position from that of the secular world around us? In a word, it is its ascetic/spiritual/liturgical quest for holiness. God is holy, meaning "set apart," manifesting from His very being qualities, attributes or virtues such as goodness, justice, righteousness, beauty, love. It is by virtue of the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, whom we receive at baptism and through the sacramental life of the Church, that the divine attributes can actually become our own. These attributes are forms of power: they radiate from God as "divine energies," communicated by the Spirit with the purpose of leading each of us along the pathway of holiness that comes to its fulfilment in the Kingdom of God, in a true and eternal participation in God's very life (referred to by Holy Tradition as *theosis* or "deification").

Secularism is not a matter of unbelief, since many practising Christians are profoundly secularised. Secularism is marked primarily by a rejection of worship, a refusal to acknowledge that God has created us not in the first instance as *homo sapiens*, but as *homo-adorans*, persons whose ultimate purpose in life is to worship God: to offer praise, adoration, thanksgiving and supplication to the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. It is only through worship -- liturgical surrendering of our life and the world into the hands of God -- that we can establish a firm basis for social justice.

Each of us is called to live in the "real world" around us, however great its pressures and however distorted its perspectives. We are called to be witnesses to God's presence and purpose at home, at the office, in the shopping centre or in the hospital.

It is there, in the little things and inconspicuous places of everyday life, that we live out our primary vocation to pray for the world, to live and die for the world's salvation.

We are called to be holy. This does not mean that we isolate ourselves from the ambient culture, making ourselves "separate" in some physical or psychological sense. It means that we seek holiness in the midst of an unholy world, in the hope that through our faithfulness to God and our witness to Him who alone is holy, we might touch the lives of others around us and help restore the world to the One who is both its Creator and its Lord.

Questions for discussion:

1. What can we learn from the Orthodox view of worship?
2. Compare and contrast the Orthodox doctrine of theosis with the Methodist doctrine of perfection.
3. How satisfactory do you find the above Orthodox definition of secularism?
4. What is the appeal of Orthodoxy in western society where it is gaining converts?
5. What is distinctive about Orthodox holiness?