

The Language Of Enemies

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Abstract

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Love of enemies is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. Yet, the Scriptures and liturgy of the Orthodox Church, and the patristic literature on which they draw, are striking in their use of hostile and uncompromising language when speaking of enemies – both spiritual and actual or personal. This article reviews such language in the Bible; the writings of Justin Martyr, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia; and in liturgical services, Baptism especially. All of this has spawned a legacy of anathemas that the author seeks to analyze and understand through the work of Jaroslav Pelikan and Elaine Pagels. Having done that, the author, in part 2, informally surveys numerous Eastern Christians today to gauge their attitudes toward this language of enemies, and then gives special attention to those who see ecumenists as the most dangerous enemies of the Orthodox Church today. The author then introduces the work of conflict theorist Vern Redekop as a useful framework to understand this process and how “structures of blessing” can be created to overcome entrenched conflicts and “structures of violence.” The author argues that Redekop's approach not only seems more congruent with the boundary-crossing and peacemaking characteristic of Jesus, but also challenges today's Orthodox to re-think their language and positions vis-à-vis their contemporary “enemies,” especially those ecumenists devoted to Christian unity.



Part 1: “Enemies” in Orthodox Scriptural, Patristic and Liturgical Traditions¹

1.1 Introduction

In the 1980’s a friend of mine was a student at Saint Vladimir’s Seminary in New York. Going into the chapel one day, he noticed that someone – he suspected a Serbian student – had inserted a penciled letter “r” into the sign “Please Hang Coats Downstairs.” It now read, “Please Hang *Croats* Downstairs.” This was taken as a little black humour at the time, but it arguably reminds one of an all-too-prevalent attitude towards enemies widely attested in the Eastern Orthodox world. This often has to do with *phyletism*, the nationalism which infects and takes over ecclesial life in many parts of the Orthodox world and depicts ecclesial life as the preserve of “our kind” at best, and at worst views outsiders as enemies. Such an outlook is what makes it possible for Russian Orthodox zealots, for example, to make common cause with Russian atheists and former communists against foreigners. Or as an Arabic saying puts it, “I and my brother are against my cousin. But I and my cousin are against the outsider.”

This tendency to demonize outsiders was a key observation made by Victoria Clark in *Why Angels Fall: A Journey Through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo*. There was much in Orthodoxy she found attractive and arresting – to her surprise – but its enemy-mongering remains a pervasive and ugly feature.

That heinous religious nationalism, with its persecution and martyr complexes and longing for death and suffering, that targeting of enemies and dangerously emotive habit of spinning pretty patterns from the past – mythologies instead of histories – will have to go.²

¹ I am grateful Dr. Paul Meyendorff and Dr. Albert Rossi, of Saint Vladimir’s Seminary, and also to my wife, Denise Jillions, for their comments and advice that went into writing this article.

² Victoria Clark, *Why Angels Fall: A Journey Through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000),

“Outsiders” like Clark are not the only ones to observe this phenomenon. In reflecting on the start of the third millennium of Christianity, Metropolitan John Zizioulas hopes we can get beyond the tragic polemics of the second millennium:

Especially the second millennium has witnessed a polemic and hatred among Christians previously unheard of in history. There is little point in trying to prove who is to be blamed for that. Our Desert Fathers have always taught us that we should always blame ourselves for the sins of all the others. Today there is a tendency among the Orthodox to stress the responsibility of the western Christians for the evil of division and for the wrongs done to the Orthodox Church by our Western brothers. History is, of course, clear in witnessing to the fact of a great deal of aggressiveness against the Orthodox on the part of the West. Deep however in the tragic reality of Christian division lies also an inability of the Orthodox to overcome and rise above the psychology of polemic in a true spirit of forgiveness and love. Confessional zeal has often proved stronger than forgiveness and love. The second millennium has been in this respect almost an unfortunate period of the Church’s history.³

While I agree with these observations, I believe that before entrenched Orthodox hostility towards others can be dismissed as passé, more needs to be understood about the pervasive enemies language in the tradition of the Church and today.

I am particularly concerned here with how Orthodox view what might be called “theological enemies” – people and groups perceived as threats to the Church. This is of special interest because ecumenism is the single most volatile issue in

414. Similar observations are found in William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (London: Flamingo, 1998).

³ Metropolitan John (Zizioulas), “*The Orthodox Church and the Third Millennium*,” (Balamand Monastery, Dec 9, 1999): <http://www.balamand.edu.lb/theology/ZizioulasLecture.htm>.