

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 101

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Topic 16: The West’s Deconstruction of Theosis – where the West went wrong; no more Church as the “Spiritual Hospital”

(How the West lost Theosis, embraced Nominalism, reduced the Gospel to Legalism, and set the Stage for Antichrist Postmodernism)

(Source book: *The Life*, chapter 10)

Several historical events combined over time in a very negative way to bring us philosophically, spiritually, and intellectually to the ugly place where we are today. The unbelieving Postmodern Antichrist society of ours has roots that can be traced very far back into the past. We can identify a mistake made by St. Augustine that later was amplified by Thomas Aquinas’ use of Aristotelian logic, which reshaped the Medieval Western church, and launched an ever-increasing snowball of rationalist philosophical nominalism which created today’s Postmodern society, and in the process, produced the Protestant world and its highly reduced versions of salvation. Lost in all of this is the Patristic understanding of the Church as the Spiritual Hospital where we come to the Divine Physician, the Lord Jesus, to access the Medicine of Grace to heal our souls.

St. Augustine lived in the 400s. He spoke Latin, he wrote too much, and unfortunately, despite all his good contributions, he made some mistakes. While he believed that a person could really know God, **in his writings there was no real distinction between God's Essence and God's Energies**. This was his **huge mistake**. However, in his day his theological errors were balanced out because in the Early Church most of the Church Fathers wrote in Greek and people could read both Greek and Latin and the consensus of the Church Fathers corrected Augustine's minority opinion mistakes. But as the centuries

rolled on in the West, they stopped reading Greek and went into the Dark Ages. (The East, however, never lost education and never had a Dark Ages.) As a result of the Dark Ages, in the West, where the clergy struggled to read only in Latin, St. Augustine’s massive amount of writings took on greater and greater importance over time because they could not read the Eastern Greek Church Fathers any longer. The corrective power of the Greek Eastern Fathers was lost as the West focused on Augustine, and unfortunately, embraced his mistakes. This was only magnified when the West broke from the East by attempting to excommunicate them in the Great Schism of AD 1054.

Things got worse for Western Christianity when the writings of the **pagan Aristotle** were translated into Latin, beginning in AD 1150. His writings were “new” to the West, which was just waking up from centuries of lack of exposure to literature due to the Dark Ages. The West got hugely excited about Aristotle. In the 1200s the famous Western churchman **Thomas Aquinas** took Aristotelian logic and combined it with Augustine's mistake about God’s Essence and Energies. Aquinas used the Aristotelian logical syllogism – (If A is B, and B is C, then A is C) - and then he applied it to Augustine's idea that God's Essence and His Energies are the same. For Thomas, it was simply logical. Since God is transcendent and we can't know His Essence, and since His Essence and His Energies are not distinct, therefore we cannot know His Energies either. For Thomas Aquinas, logically-speaking, God was **completely unknowable**, locked up in His Divine Transcendence, apart from the Incarnation and the years that the Lord Jesus Christ was on earth in human flesh. As a result of this way of thinking, Roman Catholic theology began to **deny** the possibility of anyone having any real direct experience of God. The Eastern Orthodox understanding of God being Transcendent in His Essence but knowable in His Uncreated Energies was **LOST** for the Western Christian. Theologically, **in the West, God was locked in His Transcendence by Thomas Aquinas’ logic**, who had thinned out theology to this sort of academic rationalistic syllogism. He wanted to make Aristotelian philosophy the “handmaiden of theology,” as he was trying to marry pagan philosophy with Christianity. For years Thomas was writing his huge book of logic, all 3000 pages, known as *The Summa Theologica* (The Summary of Theology). In it he was attempting to explain the entire universe, heaven

and hell, using pagan logic. But Thomas also desperately wanted to have some nearness to God. He wanted to be able to talk about God as being real, so he resorted to using logic to try to make logical proofs **about** God, since according to his logic you **couldn't** have any direct experience of God. As a result, ever since that time, the Western Catholics have started to talk about "**created grace**"—instead of the Uncreated Grace and Energies of God—since they had no theological defense for any understanding of a direct experience of the Uncreated Grace/Energies of God.

On a side note, apparently Thomas Aquinas personally abandoned his rational attempts to explain God and the entire universe using pagan Aristotelian syllogism and logic. Near the end of his life, he claimed to have had some mystical experiences that dramatically changed his personal opinion on the matter. He actually put down his pen and stopped writing. He simply **quit**. He told his disciple, who had asked him why he quit writing. Thomas said: “I cannot. Such things have been revealed to me that what I have written seems but straw.” In the face of a genuine experience of the Grace (Energies) of the Holy Spirit, his human logic appeared quite useless.

While Thomas might have had an Orthodox experience of the Energies of God which humbled his academic pride and stopped him personally, it **did not stop** his disciple. The disciple believed in the Aristotelian philosophy and he finished the last volume of *The Summa Theologica* by himself, and the work was published. **It impacted the Roman Catholics forever**. The Western Church canonized Aquinas as their new saint and made his books of Aristotelian logic required reading ever since. Despite his personal repentance, Aquinas’ ideas written in his books heavily shaped Medieval Roman Catholic theology and philosophy. His bringing in the ideas of the pagan philosopher Aristotle transformed and **reinvented Roman Catholic theology**, moving it away from its former Orthodox Catholic Patristic base and establishing it as a philosophical Scholastic Medieval church. Ironically, the Greek-speaking Eastern Orthodox always had the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and they never had a Dark Ages. The East always had universities in Constantinople, but they did not value the old pagan philosophers very much. Instead, they considered the saints—who were being transfigured by Divine

Energy and Glory, and who could heal the sick and raise the dead—to be more influential and more worthy of respect than their ancient pagan philosophers. But the West, as it broke out of its centuries of Dark Ages, embraced pagan philosophy as if it were the latest fashion. Thanks to the popularization of the books of Thomas Aquinas, the Western Church had changed. It had embraced philosophy. Now the old game of the Greek pagan philosophers was revived. Each new philosopher began to try to outsmart and out argue the older philosophers. This competition created a huge centuries-long **slide down a slippery philosophical slope in the world of ideas**, which has landed us in the Postmodern world of the 20th and 21st Centuries. Let’s see how that happened.

The philosophers who came right after Thomas Aquinas, such as the **Nominalists**, in the next century, thought that Thomas wasn't logical enough and they went further in locking God into His Transcendence. They are called “Nominalists” from the word “**nom**” which means “**name**”. For these rationalists, spiritual realities were **not really real**, but are just mere “noms” or “names”. So, they argued: “why does Thomas waste his time trying to logically find proofs that point to some reality about God Who is absolutely Transcendent and unknowable?” Their own logic was simpler...**if God is transcendent both in essence and energy, then you can't know Him. Period.** End of discussion. You can't know God directly at all. It's only faith. You can't know if He exists, you can't experience His Presence, you can't prove Him by logic, you can't talk definitively about any reality to spiritual matters, it's just up to your subjective faith. This has become the dominant idea in the Western world today. It has spiritually destroyed many souls.

The Orthodox Christian East immediately rejected and fought against this nominalist rationalist idea, because it is **not real to life**. It does **not match our experience**. Yes, we have faith. But our faith is confirmed by genuine spiritual experiences and miracles. St. Gregory Palamas held two very famous church councils in the 1300s that are so important they could be called the 8th and 9th Ecumenical Councils (these councils are super important to the East but obviously never accepted in the West). In them he defended the fact that the monks on Mount Athos were **directly experiencing the Divine Energies of God** when they saw the Uncreated Divine Light of Christ, the Light of

Tabor, as they prayed **the Jesus Prayer**. But the Western rational nominalists argued against Palamas and said, “there is no such thing as a direct experience of God...therefore, whatever those monks are seeing, it is just their imagination.” But Palamas shot back, proving from the Bible and from the Church’s Holy Tradition that **God's Essence is transcendent and unknowable, but His Energies are immanent and experiential and knowable** (think of Moses and the burning bush). He argued that we know that God is real because we really experience Him in His Divine Energies. In this way, St. Gregory Palamas saved Orthodoxy from the West's rationalistic mistake. His church Councils condemned the rational nominalist way of thinking as being in error. He accused the Western nominalist philosophers of having **invented a fake "philosophical God" in their intellectual imagination who wasn't real.** But the REAL God -- Who has revealed Himself as the Most Holy Trinity -- has really been **experienced**. The holy monks and nuns who pray intimately and deeply to Jesus Christ were still seeing Him and His Glory. As a result of the work of St. Gregory, the East did not allow the Western Renaissance “worship” of **reason** to capture it. The Orthodox East never had a rationalistic “Enlightenment”, but stayed spiritually enlightened by sticking to its Holy Tradition and constantly praying the Jesus Prayer: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” St. Gregory Palamas prophetically warned the Western church **universities and its rationalist academics**, that if they continued to follow their misguided rationalist nominalist course, that “in the future the gates of their universities would **prove to be the gates of Hell themselves.**” Students would enter and lose all faith in God. His prophecy has proven true today.

However, the West didn't read Greek very much, so historically it didn't pay attention to Palamas. Instead, as he warned, the West continued expanding its nominalist rationalistic unbelief down through the centuries, getting always bigger and bigger, saying at first: “**there is no such thing** as the Sacraments...**those are just names or ‘noms’**, but not realities.” The Protestant nominalists of the 1500’s said: “**there is no such thing** as Church tradition,” “**no such thing** as Church hierarchical authority,” “**no such thing** as the need to look at the Church Fathers for their consensus,” “**no such thing** as

Sacramental Baptism,” “**no such thing** as the Holy Eucharist.” It was common to hear a Protestant Reformer claim that all he needed was his Bible and “sound reasoning”.

Then historical era known as the "**Enlightenment**" arrived in the 1600s and 1700s and its rationalist nominalists said: “there is no such thing as divine revelation” (truth is only arrived at logically by human brains), “no such thing as prophecy,” “no such thing as miracles,” “**no such thing as ghosts/spirits**,” “no such thing as a personal savior” (just a generic deist ‘god’). And then other nominalist rationalists came along who said “**there is no such thing as God**.” Other nominalists came along who said: “there is no such thing as arriving at truth logically, only scientifically.”

And then we come to the **Postmodernism** of the 20th century where nominalism completely took over the intellectual university system with the professors all saying: “**there is no such thing as truth**.” Welcome to the Postmodern age, the post-truth age, the anti-truth age, the Antichrist age, where everybody can make up their own personal truth -- "you do you." So **Augustine's** mistake (of not seeing a distinction between God’s Essence and His Energies), when combined with **Aquinas's** mistake of embracing pagan rationalist philosophy and using **Aristotle's** logic (to lock God into His unknowable Transcendence) put the West on a trajectory, philosophically speaking, that pointed the Western man away from an understanding that you can truly experience God directly as Moses experienced God at the burning bush and as the Orthodox Christians continue to experience God in His Divine Power every Pascha with the Holy Fire that falls in Jerusalem at the Holy Sepulcher. And all our miracles, and weeping icons, and incorrupt saints, and constant healings, and all the experiences of the Divine Uncreated Light that monks continue to have in the Orthodox Church have kept this experience of the Divine Energies and Grace of the Holy Spirit a **reality** in the mind and life of the Orthodox Church. Thank God, the Christian East did not try to sweep aside God’s Grace by worshipping human logic and rationalism.

As a result of this growing rationalist nominalism and the Western lack of acknowledging the truth that one can genuinely experience the Grace of the Holy Spirit, the Western

concept of salvation and how it was explained became very reduced and limited. It began with the ideas of a medieval Western theologian named Anselm who tried to explain salvation to medieval knights in a very fleshly human way. He came up with a pattern of explaining the Gospel that has become the norm in the West, in the centuries that followed, which puts the blame on God rather than on man. **A big switch happened**. Instead of talking about salvation in terms of mankind needing to plug back into and experience the healing Divine Energies of the Grace of God, instead of talking about theosis and salvation as union with a God of love, the West’s discussion of salvation became centered on how God viewed man. It became all God’s problem, so to speak. Salvation was explained saying that God’s honor was offended by our sin which ignited God’s wrath. God changed and became somehow angry at us (even though the Bible says God cannot change in His Divine Essence – in God there is “no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” James 1:17). The Protestants (adopting Anselm’s ideas) ignored that verse and said God changed and got angry until His Son’s sacrifice on the cross appeased and cooled down His anger. As the wrath of the infinitely dishonored Father was matched by His Son’s infinitely honorable sacrifice, and as the Son’s punishment satisfied the Father’s sense of Divine Justice, this calmed God the Father down and things became at peace between us and God. In this way of explaining salvation, there is no discussion of a real change in the heart of man, no healing of the human passions, no real connection to God’s Divine Energies, no plugging back into communion with God, no direct experience of the Grace/Energies of God, no teaching of humanity’s transfiguration through union with Christ, no discussion of sharing God’s glory in life, and certainly no talk of saints or of becoming saints. (All such discussion had been removed by the nominalists, thanks to the Aristotelian rationalist logic that had been inserted into the West by Thomas Aquinas.) Instead, for **Western** theology, everything became very legal and juridical. God just sees man as forgiven. God does the changing, not man. For example, the Protestant Reformer Luther explained that God looks at us and sees through His Son’s sacrifice on the cross that the yuckiness of our sin is now covered by His mercy, like garbage is covered by white snow. At first this sounds nice and very generous of God. But think about it for a moment. Is this really a good thing? The garbage of the passions in your heart is still there, **it hasn’t been removed**. You are a forgiven pile of

trash who is still enslaved to the passions. What kind of spiritual liberation and recreation is that? If you are an active slave to an evil passion, are you not still serving the Devil? St. Paul wrote out lists of passions and taught the 1st centuries Christians that if they did not cease doing those sins, they will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, even though they were baptized Christians (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Yet the Protestant nominalists preached that you personally do nothing, other than believe this and accept God's forgiveness. There is **no synergy**, no connection to Divine Grace, no asceticism, no denying yourself, no taking up your cross and following Christ, no transfiguration, no transformation of your soul, no true participation in the Energy of God which defies you and brings you to theosis—to Union with God. Instead, for the nominalist Protestant, God does all the work.

Other Protestant reformers, motivated by these growing nominalist ideas, pushed farther into heresy and limited even more the understanding of salvation. The Protestant Reformer Calvin simply said God picks some people for heaven and picks other people for hell and we have absolutely nothing to do in the decision. God does all the work. Man is very passive. What an awful and unbiblical way of explaining salvation! What an ugly capricious unfair “God”! Calvin’s idea of God does not match the Jesus of the Bible Who told the Parable of the Prodigal Son to explain to us the merciful heart of God Who is always ready to receive home every repentant sinner. But Calvin in his nominalism taught that **“there is no such thing as work”** in salvation. But he was stepping away from Holy Tradition and the Bible. St. James wrote that Faith without Works on our part is dead (James 2:17). St. Paul said that our faith has to work through love (Galatians 5:6). But the Protestant nominalist reformers ignored these verses and said “there is no such thing as works” and “there is no such thing as Holy Tradition” to help them interpret the Bible either. Basically, the nominalist Protestants were in essence redefining salvation and teaching that **“there is no such thing as synergy”**. For them, salvation was not a healing process. It was a legal framework put entirely on God’s shoulders. The cooperation (synergy) taught by St. Paul in Philippians 2:12-13 was protested against and ignored: **“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God Who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”** No synergy for these

theological rebels. Luther basically taught that even after receiving forgiveness, Christians remain piles of junk that never get healed and never get cleaned up and never get transformed. God **just looks** at us **differently**. He is no longer mad at us. He looks at us junky people and says “You are good now,” but still in our heart we remain broken and in disrepair and unconnected to God. Instead of explaining salvation in terms of a spiritual hospital where we go to be healed from our passions as well as forgiven, instead of explaining salvation in terms of the lack of communion with God and we need to restore that communion (the toaster needs to get plugged back into the wall, the light bulb needs to be put back into the socket in order to be energized, the mirror of the heart [nous] needs to be washed clean and be reoriented so that it reflects the Divine Light), salvation in the West **became all a legal problem of God and how He looks at us**. Does He look at us in anger or does He look at us in peace? Has His Divine anger and justice been satisfied or not? And because nominalists in the West say “**there is no such thing as direct experience of the Energy of God**,” this non-synergistic non-cooperative Reformed Protestant way of explaining the Gospel **removed man from doing his part to cooperate with God's Energies** for inner spiritual healing and salvation, and instead put all the work of salvation onto God. The Protestants kept fighting against any idea of humans doing work in their salvation because of their nominalist philosophical background which they had inherited from the Medieval Roman Catholics. For them, there is “no such thing as your personal work” when it comes to Salvation because “there is no such thing as participation in Divine Energies”—because Aquinas and Augustine long ago had **locked those out of human’s reach**. So, when you hear a Baptist Protestant present you the Gospel, he does not talk about spiritual healing or Divine Energies. Instead, he comes up with four simple "spiritual laws" and it is all based on Anselm and is highly reduced because nominalism has thrown almost everything else away. The Baptist tells you: 1) you have sinned, 2) God is angry at your sin, 3) but His Son died to cool down the Father's anger, 4) and if you believe this and you pray and apologize to God and accept His forgiveness right now, you can instantly become a Christian and go to heaven if you die tonight! One-two-three-four = you are **saved!** For the nominalist Protestant (such as the Baptist), there is no Holy Eucharist that you need to eat to have eternal life (ignoring John 6), no real Sacramental Baptism that unites you to Christ

(ignoring Galatians 3:27), nothing about real interpenetration by the Holy Spirit's gracious Presence, nothing about transfiguration or sanctification as being part of salvation!!! (ignoring that the Bible teaches “salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” - 2 Thess. 2:13). But **nominalist** rationalist **reduction** and **Anselm's** Medieval ideas of **satisfaction** atonement have shrunken Western Christianity to its present state: **instant, quick, and simple, and non-church**. On page 137 of *The Life*, Clark Carlton says: “Christianity, therefore, must **reject** the **satisfaction theory** of the atonement because it violates the most fundamental principles of Christian theology and because it leaves man fundamentally **unchanged**. For the Orthodox, to be **saved** is to be restored to true spiritual **health**. It is not God's attitude toward man that needs to be changed, but rather man’s state.” This is why we Orthodox Christians view ourselves as patients in God’s hospital, the Church, where we go to receive the Medicine of Healing and Immortality, the Divine Holy Mysteries (Sacraments), where we meet Christ our Divine Physician Who gives us the Grace (Energies) of the Holy Spirit to heal us.

Summary: We have identified **St. Augustine’s mistake** (of not understanding that God’s Essence is distinct from His Energies), which was later amplified by **Thomas Aquinas** who used Aristotelian **logic** to lock God’s Grace/Energies out of our reach, making God absolutely “unknowable”, in the minds of many. Aristotle’s’ philosophy—as taught by Aquinas—entirely **reshaped** the Medieval Western church and launched an ever-increasing snowball of rationalist philosophical **nominalism** that produced the **Protestant** world and its highly **reduced** versions of salvation, and eventually created today’s **Postmodern** society. Lost in all of this is the full Patristic understanding of the Church as the Spiritual Hospital where we come to the Divine Physician, the Lord Jesus, to access the Medicine of Grace to forgive and heal our souls and grant us eternal life.

Having said all this, one must not think that the Holy Spirit was unable to do a miracle or some work of Grace in the life and heart of any Western Christian for the last thousand years—far be it! But rather, due to the barriers invented by their mistakes in theologies, it became harder and slower for Western people to accept the fact that when someone among said they had a spiritual experience, that it was real. Hardness of heart due to the

ever-growing rationalism and nominalism and lack of faith caused many people to doubt that miracles even existed anymore, and so it was difficult for them to pray for one. If someone had a mystical experience, the majority of the people, being biased by their wrong theologies, would persecute him or her. In the West, a mystic became considered as the strange outsider to Christian society, while in the Orthodox East, the Christian mystic was considered the norm, a starets, a saint in the making. Certainly, God was trying His hardest to do what He does—to share His Energies of Grace with Westerners—but their off-based theologies did **not** match that reality, could not explain that reality, and therefore often biased people and **closed** their hearts against that spiritual reality. And the more highly educated the Westerners became, due to their university systems, the worse their faith was. More and more people became enemies of God and fought Him openly. The situation just grew worse and worse until we developed the **Postmodern** era of today where real faith has evaporated from most hearts. Jesus asked: “When the Son of Man returns, will He even find faith left on the Earth?” (Luke 18:8) St. Paul prophesied about all this and called it the “**great apostasy**”, the great falling away from faith that would happen before the Second Coming of Christ (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Thank God, the Lord promised to shorten the End Time days “for the sake of the elect”—those few faithful who are holding on to True Faith (Matthew 24:22).

So now we have seen how, through a long historical process, the West **deconstructed** its previous Orthodox Catholic early church understanding of salvation as **theosis** (union with God), and instead embraced nominalism and Aristotelian philosophy, invented Protestantism which reduced the understanding of salvation to legalism, and finally ended up in 21st century Postmodernism.

This has now brought us to **the end** of our first semester of catechism classes – *The Basics of Orthodoxy 101*. In the second semester—“**102**”—we will take a closer look at this mystical Hospital, **the Holy Church**, and **study the Sacraments of the Church** one by one—Holy Baptism, Holy Chrismation, Holy Confession, Holy Communion, Holy Unction, Holy Matrimony, Holy Ordination, as well as the Structure of the Church, Cycles of Prayer, Monasticism, and other related topics.