

CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONALIST  
ORTHODOX THOUGHT  
A Second Volume



by  
Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna,  
Bishop Auxentios of Photiki,  
and Archimandrite Akakios

CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST  
ORTHODOX STUDIES

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## Chapter 3

### DEMONOLOGY IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

*by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna*

The second law of thermodynamics establishes, by accounting for the effects of entropy, that physical and chemical realities are governed by a tension between states of balance or equilibrium and states of imbalance or opposition. A principle of engineering is that for every constructive or supportive force there is a corresponding destructive force or counterforce. Those very forces which sustain and maintain the structural integrity of physical objects are consistently and everywhere in a state of resistance to forces of disintegration. Indeed, the biological world can be ultimately understood by the juxtaposition of the antipodes of life-generating and life-supporting mechanisms with life-threatening and life-destructive mechanisms: by contrasting birth and death. And it is precisely within this notion of the struggle between constructive and destructive forces that we can understand the most fundamental elements of the cosmology which underlies the consensual Patristic witness of the Eastern Church.

The Eastern Fathers—not exclusively in contradistinction to the Latin Fathers, though with an emphatic consistency characteristic of their separate witness—, portray the spiritual life and, indeed, the course of Christian history in images of the constant struggle between the evil force of Satan and his demonic cohorts and the goodness of God and those energized by His living force,

<sup>1</sup> “Demonology in the Orthodox Church: A Psychological Perspective” originally appeared in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. xxxiii, No. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 45–61. Reprinted by permission. This paper was first delivered as a faculty lecture at the Theological Institute of Uppsala University in Sweden, in the autumn of 1987.

the Martyrs, Saints, and Angels. Were one to ask a scientist why the transformation of energy is better than its destruction, or why, in the midst of “valueless” science, the scientist seeks to build and not to destroy, his answer would be vague at best. He might retreat to some idea about the “quality of life” or man’s search for creativity, but his answer would certainly be equivocal. Not so with the Fathers. If one searches their writings for an explanation of the goodness of that which is creative and aligned with the forces of God, they will respond that this truth is as intuitively true to the human psyche—flowing forth, as it does, from Divine Revelation—as is evidence for the opposing forces of the physical universe empirically true and demonstrable. Thus, not only does the cosmology of the Eastern Fathers reflect a certain reality about the empirical world, but it resolutely includes within cosmological reality a Theocentric notion of constructive good. God and His “friends,” as many have called the positive spiritual entities and the Martyrs and Saints, are to be desired over Satan and his destructive demons. This desire is the basis of spiritual life—of the spiritual struggle which is spiritual life.

This Eastern Patristic emphasis on the struggle between good and evil forces in the universe has often been naïvely attacked as a form of dualism; identified quite inaccurately with certain neo-Platonic assumptions; and even rather stupidly associated with primitive Gnosticism. These misunderstandings result, one must argue, primarily from a superficial knowledge of the Fathers and of philosophy itself. Though the Eastern Fathers do, as we have noted, base their cosmology on a struggle between good and evil, the intent of their characterization of spiritual struggle is by no means neo-Platonic or Gnostic. Nor does it posit an impassable chasm between good and evil, as one finds in dualistic models; rather, the Fathers portray a very organic and natural interaction between these forces. Indeed the very anthropology of the Fathers places within the human being elements of good and evil that interact and intermingle in the natural course of human be-

havior. It is for this reason that I did not, without clear purpose, refer to the interaction between constructive and destructive forces in my introductory remarks above. Just as physical reality, though possessed by an interaction between forces of a positive and negative kind, does not present to us a dualistic model of conflict, so the Fathers, too, speak of contrast, struggle, and conflict in an integrated manner.

We must also remember that Christian cosmology, again in the particular emphasis of the Eastern Fathers, rests not only on a revealed assumption about the goodness of God and the constructive forces associated with Him, but also assumes that goodness—“light,” to use a Johannine metaphor—has triumphed ontologically over evil. The spiritual struggle for union with God, for salvation, for the transformation of the human being by his participation in the Divine, for *θέωσις*, or divinization, as the Eastern Fathers call this restoration of man—all of this rests in the potential for human redemption realized in the victory of Christ over death, by the Cross and the Resurrection. Though in history and in human existence, our struggle for freedom from evil is real and essential, the Cross and the Paschal event make our victory possible and insure that, for one who wishes to align himself with God and with His goodness, the forces of evil will pale before those of good. Let us turn for a moment to a very relevant passage from the Desert Fathers, those ascetics of the Egyptian desert who, in the first few centuries of the Christian era, lived the lives which Eastern Patristic theology attempts to express:

Abba Dorotheos of the Thebaïd [*fl.* 4th cen.] once sent his disciple to take water from the well. Just as the disciple bent down to take up the water, he saw within the well a huge poisonous snake. Excitedly, he dropped his pail and ran to his Elder.

‘Abba, we are done for! Our water is poisoned. I found a viper in the well!’

‘And if the Devil decides to throw vipers in all of the wells, will you then die of thirst?’ the Elder asked, shaking his head at the cowardice of his disciple.

Afterwards the Elder went to the well and pulled up a bucket of water himself. He made the Sign of the Cross and drank first, afterwards giving some to his disciple.

‘Where the Cross is,’ he said, ‘the evil of the Enemy cannot reside.’<sup>2</sup>

The cosmological struggle between good and evil expresses itself, as we see, in the individual Christian life as it reaches up to the potential and power of divinization bestowed on the human by the Cross and Resurrection. Writing about the ecclesiology of Saint Ignatios of Antioch (†106), the eminent Greek theologian Father John Romanides has noted that individual salvation, which is “completely Christocentric,”<sup>3</sup> rising out of the Resurrected Christ, rests partly on Christ’s “granting of the power to defeat the devil.”<sup>4</sup> Father John expands this notion, building on what he sees as Saint Ignatios’ essentially perfect expression of the Eastern Patristic Tradition, to speak of the witness of the Church Herself:

Participation of [in] the love of God in union with each other [in the Church, that is], which is indeed communion of divine life, can be weakened and destroyed by man’s inattention to the ways of Satan. ...The Church has two aspects, one positive—love, unity, and communion of immortality with each other and with the Saints in Christ; and one negative—the war against Satan and his powers, already defeated in the flesh of Christ by those living in Christ, beyond death.... Christology is the positive aspect of the Church, but is conditioned by Biblical demonology, which is the key negative factor which determines both Christology and Ecclesiology, both of which are incomprehensible without an adequate understanding of the work and methods of Satan.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Γεροντιζόν* (Thessaloniki, 1980), p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> The Rev. John S. Romanides, “The Ecclesiology of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. VII, Nos. 1 & 2 (Winter 1961–1962), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62–64.

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“This collection of essays provides an important independent perspective on a number of central aspects of Christian thought, including the relationship of humanity to God, the Scriptures, the Sacraments, Christian tradition, and mysticism. The book, written from a traditional orthodox point of view, dispels some Western misunderstandings of the Eastern Church, and it will be read with profit by Roman Catholic and Protestant, as well as by Eastern Orthodox, readers.”

*Jeffrey Burton Russell*  
*Professor of History*  
*University of California,*  
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