Christ the Conqueror of Hell: The Descent into Hades from an Orthodox Perspective

(Hilarion Alfeyev)

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In recent months, I have talked a great deal about politics and current events. It is time to pivot, for a moment, and talk about something totally different—the eternal. This book is a detailed analysis of Eastern Orthodox views of Christ's descent into Hades, a core yet obscure Christian doctrine found in both the Nicene Creed and the shorter Apostle's Creed. It was recommended to me by a friend of mine, a Presbyterian minister, who knows of my particular interest in the areas of theology implicated by this doctrine. And, as expected, the book highlights areas of both commonality and difference among separate branches of Christianity.

Where we usually stand in our church I face a very large Orthodox icon of the Resurrection, which at first I found difficult to fully comprehend. Like all Orthodox icons, it is laden with symbolism and follows a standard form with relatively minor variations. Other than the risen, triumphant Christ, its most prominent features are that Christ is standing on a broken bronze door, surrounded at his feet by keys and open locks scattered across a pool of darkness, and that he is lifting a man and a woman, on his left and on his right, from stone coffins. The meaning of this is not self-evident, but easy enough to find out. The man and woman are Adam and Eve; the doors are the doors of Hades, broken and thrown down by Christ; the locks those that had bound men and women who died prior to the Resurrection; and the darkness is Hades itself. That is to say, the descent into Hades, an event barely mentioned in the Bible, forms a large portion of the Orthodox view of the Resurrection.

As with all Orthodox iconography, there is a lot more to both the symbolism and the theology, which I am not even remotely qualified to discuss. But for today's purposes, there are two critical elements in the doctrine of the Descent. First, that Christ descended to the realm of Death and Satan (called interchangeably Hades or Hell), destroying the power of both and releasing at least part of fallen humanity from the grasp of evil. Second, that Christ is the Victor and Conqueror; he

did not come to negotiate or to reach a compromise solution, but to destroy Death, by his own death, and bring Life. This latter is a core element of Orthodox theology and one which distinguishes it somewhat from Western Christian theology, which often emphasizes Christ's suffering more than his victory, sometimes even making Christ seem maudlin. The Orthodox tend to have more of a Chuck Norris view of Christianity, and their approach to the Descent is no exception. (It is also evident in such things as the differences in Holy Saturday liturgies, which in the West are sorrowful, but in the East are already ramping up the sense of triumph, prior to the actual Resurrection.)

Christ the Conqueror of Hell was written by a Russian archbishop, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, and translated into English. It is a modern book, ten years old, although nothing is truly modern in the Orthodox Church, something that quickly becomes evident reading this book. The bare fact that Christ descended into Hades is necessarily shared by all Christians (it is not a *theologoumena*, or optional opinion), but in both the Eastern and Western traditions, there is no formal statement of the Descent—that is, either the details of what exactly happened, or of what that means as a result. The Metropolitan's project is to examine all relevant Orthodox pronouncements on the doctrine and, to the extent possible, harmonize them, or, to the extent that is not possible, point out areas of contention, and what the theological downstream effects may be.

The Descent is a difficult doctrine, though, on many levels. Christians agree that prior to Christ's death and resurrection, due to the Fall, Heaven was not open to any of the dead (other than perhaps Enoch and Elijah), and that Christ reversed that closure. The key question is who was permitted, after the Descent, to leave Hades, the abode of all the dead until that time, and enter Heaven? The Western church relatively early on answered that question with rigidity—only the righteous, that is to say, those who would have entered Heaven anyway. They just had had to wait a while. The Orthodox, on the other hand, who contain a distinct strain of universalism, often (but not always) espouse variations on the conclusion that the dead were able to listen to the Good News of Christ, first through the preaching of the also-dead John the Baptist and then from Christ himself, and choose Christ. That is, in effect, everybody got a second chance. The Metropolitan's purpose, it

is pretty clear, in writing this book is to provide support for this belief, what might be called "universalism lite." Some even suggest that Christ released everyone in Hades and admitted them all to Heaven, something the Metropolitan does not reject, but does not strongly endorse either.

As with all theological questions, which cannot be examined in isolation or derived from abstract principles, how one answers these questions depends on what authority one recognizes. Metropolitan Alfeyev exhaustively analyzes all Orthodox authorities. The most important, of course, is Scripture, but the Bible says relatively little about the Descent. Its most prominent mention is 1 Peter 3:18–21, which makes an explicit statement that it happened, and there are several more oblique mentions in both the New and Old Testaments, such as Paul's statement in Ephesians 4:9 that Christ "descended into the lower parts of the earth," and the statement made by Christ in Revelation 1:17, "I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." For Protestants, who mostly view authority as personal interpretation of the Bible, this suggests that the Descent is on dubious ground. But as the Metropolitan is at pains to make clear, the Descent was very clearly the universal belief of the early Church, and therefore can be in no doubt whatsoever, since tradition, as shown in the writings of the Fathers, the liturgy of the Church, and even some of the apocryphal writings, is a wholly valid basis for any Christian belief. "Scripture grew out of tradition and composes an inseparable part of it. Scripture is interpreted not spontaneously but from the perspective of tradition." (Although this book is not a work of apologetics, rather one of exegetics, it is always interesting to me how much detailed thought went into the development of Christian doctrine, contrary to the simplistic views of today's anti-Christian writers, who seem to think that stupidity and credulity were the norm then, and are now.)

Also included in the Metropolitan's analysis are, naturally, the Church Fathers, as well as liturgical hymnography and poetry across the centuries, and the Liturgy itself. These latter he ranks higher in authority than the writings of the Fathers, which follows from the consensus-based approach of the Orthodox to theology. "The authority enjoyed by the liturgical texts in the Orthodox Church is based on a process of acceptance that occurred over the course of many centuries." In fact, the Metropolitan goes to some length to emphasize that "some forget

that the church's *lex credendi* is based on its *lex orandi* and that Orthodox services are an organic and adequate expression of the church's dogmatic teaching." Most of what the Fathers say, if not confirmed by conciliar authority or by liturgical acceptance, is *theologoumena*. Powerful and persuasive, perhaps, but not truly authoritative.

Having noted and discussed Scriptural references to the Descent in the Old and New Testaments, the Metropolitan proceeds by looking at a range of apocryphal Scriptures. His point is not that these should be canonical, but that themes consistently appearing in the apocrypha were obviously important to the early Church, and are evidence of tradition that is doctrine. What he examines are not the anathemized apocryphal writings, such as the so-called Gnostic Gospels, which in some cases directly contradict core Christian doctrines, but other books that were influential and widely accepted as authoritative in the early Church but ultimately did not "make the cut." Among these are *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Acts of Pilate*, and, for current purposes most importantly, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, from which comes much of the Orthodox iconography of the Resurrection. All of these provide quite a bit of detail about the specifics of the Descent, in which Christ "destroyed Death by death." The general idea is that prior to the Descent, Hell was a place God permitted to be outside of his purview and within the control of the Devil, but Christ shattered this darkness and ended the control of the Devil, exemplified by his hold over the dead. However, these writings are less clear on the precise effects of Christ's descent on the souls then in Hell, or on souls of those that died after the Descent.

Next the Metropolitan analyzes the writings of the Church Fathers, beginning with those up to the third century, from Saint John Chrysostom to Saint Ephrem the Syrian, and continuing with Eastern theologians up to the eighth century (since when nothing of note has been added to the Orthodox tradition), such as Saint Cyril of Alexandria and Saint John Damascene. All these theologians spoke about the question at hand—what was the meaning of the Descent for those in Hell? The Metropolitan demonstrates the great subtlety of thought among these men, with particular emphasis on their thoughts on the relationship of free will to the ultimate status of each human being. He shows that the general feeling, then as now, among Eastern theologians is that ultimately all will be united with God—but that for some, that unity

will be suffering, because they chose to reject God's love. They may not be in Hell precisely, but it is functionally the same thing. There is no true consensus on whether that rejection is or must be permanent, whether made before, during, or after the Descent.

The Metropolitan does not advert to a difficulty that I face with some of these discussions, that they imply a temporal element that is generally thought to be lacking from the eternal, in Christian thinking. That the dead had to wait implies the passing of time, but if eternity is the eternal Now, what meaning does that have? This is related to another question—did the Descent have after-effects, such that it opened doors for those who have died since the Resurrection as well? The Metropolitan does touch on this latter question, but only briefly. I suppose I will have to wait for discussion of these questions; the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart is coming out with a book on universalism this fall, so maybe he will touch on them.

Metropolitan Alfeyev also examines Western Fathers, such as Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine. Doctrine there diverged relatively early from that of the East, tending to the view that the Descent had no effect on the already-decided fates of those in Hell, and in general expressing some skepticism that the Descent is particularly relevant to God's plan of salvation. Saint Thomas Aquinas completed this line of thinking, which is the position of the Roman Church today. As the Metropolitan points out, Aquinas, with his rigid and legalistic systematization, introduced an alien degree of certainty to this (and other) theological doctrines. In contrast, the Orthodox are often content to simply view doctrines as mysteries that cannot be more fully explicated than they already have been, and that is true of many aspects of the Descent.

Finally, we return to liturgy, both the liturgy itself and the hymns attached to it. The theology of hymns, in particular, provides an interesting contrast to the Aquinas-type reasoning to which we in the West often limit theology. The Orthodox believe that theology is not limited to bare reasoning but also comprehends glorifying God through poetry and metaphor. The Metropolitan extensively quotes a great deal of such hymnology and poetry, much of it in strictly defined forms strange to Western ears and only surviving in fragments in day-to-day Orthodox liturgical practice. The form is often point-counterpoint, complete with plotlines and refrains, with personifications of Death, Hades, and

Satan playing roles as Christ descends and destroys them, leading the captives out of Hell. The net effect is a form of indirect theological exposition which has greater power by being more evocative of emotions and imagery.

The actual Orthodox liturgy contains many explicit references to the Descent. The Metropolitan analyzes hundreds of these, carefully parsing their phrasing. This is the central piece of the Metropolitan's argument; his aim is to demonstrate that the substantial majority of Orthodox liturgical references indicate that Christ released *all* the souls in Hell, and those that suggest otherwise strongly suggest that all the souls were at least given the opportunity to be released, regardless of their actions during life. John the Baptist, "last of the prophets and first of the apostles," preached the Good News to them, making straight Christ's path in Hell as on Earth, and then Christ himself preached. The Metropolitan notes the Orthodox belief that the angels were astonished at the result of the Descent, and repeatedly advocates that this only makes sense if Christ did something more dramatic than simply release the righteous who had been waiting for Him.

In other words, the Metropolitan is advocating a form of universalism, *apocatastasis*, the universal reconciliation, which is a pretty common line of thought among the Orthodox. He touches on related claims, including the belief, most prominent in Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, that Hell can be salutary—in other words, not that Hell does not exist, which is agreed to be false, but that positive spiritual movement is possible after death. This is not the same as the question of the disposition of the souls in Hades as a result of the Descent, but is obviously related. In the West, answering this question led to the development of Purgatory. But the Orthodox reject Purgatory, believing it to be, like the *filioque*, a bogus innovation. And without Purgatory, this line of thought necessarily implies some variant on universalism.

The Metropolitan never formally endorses universalism, but this is not for the same reason that modern heretics in the Roman church, led by the chief heretic, Pope Francis, dance on the edges of their heresies—that is, in order to be able to deny they are espousing heresy. Rather, it is because the answer is unknowable. "The answer to this mystery will be revealed only in the kingdom to come, in which we will see God as he is and in which God will be 'all in all.' " He does point out the broad

support existing for his position—for example, that the Orthodox, most notably in the services of Pentecost, pray for those in Hell. This alone suggests that universalism cannot be ruled out within the Orthodox tradition. Nor can it be ruled in. We will all have to wait and see, and we'll all find out eventually, much sooner rather than later, in the grand scheme of things.

It is interesting to note that although the Western churches, both Catholic and Protestant, have long rejected universalism, it has recently crept back into the Roman church, in particular through the efforts of Hans Urs von Balthasar. It's not precisely the same as Orthodox universalism, though; differences exist that exemplify certain different tendencies between West and East. Most notably, von Balthasar (it is said as a result of his close relationship with the mystic Adrienne von Speyr) put forth the idea, also found in Calvinism, that Christ suffered in his descent into Hades in the same way, or in a variation on the same way, as did the dead, or even the damned. Such an idea is wholly rejected by the East (the Metropolitan quotes Saint Athanasius to this effect), which views Christ as the Victor, even in his death, and as the One who put fear into evil after his death, not the reverse. But again, I am not qualified to say much about such matters.

Books like this, aside from spiritual value and academic interest, are valuable because they remove us from the quarrels of the day. If you're tired of hearing about whatever is on the news, I strongly recommend reading this book, or another that appeals to you, as a way to both improve your own spiritual condition and to help yourself take the longer view—the permanent view, in fact.