

THE HOLY FIRE: THE STORY OF THE FATHERS OF THE EASTERN CHURCH

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It's Lent, so let's spend a little time away from politics. *The Holy Fire*, first published in 1957, when Eastern Orthodoxy had zero presence in the religious consciousness of most of America, is a beautifully-written popular history of ten towering eastern Fathers of the Church. Popular history in 1957 is not comparable to popular history in 2023, however, so this book reads like what might be an advanced college text today, if colleges studied anything worthwhile. Regardless, Payne's book is an outstanding introduction to Orthodoxy in historical context, which is, no doubt, why St. Vladimir's Press republished it.

This is a work of history, not theology. The Preface, written for St. Vladimir's by the late Father Thomas Hopko (himself a popular and prolific author), takes some care to point this out, gently criticizing the book for both (minor) factual and (more major) theological errors. But the former is, perhaps, always part of popular history; the latter understandable given that Payne was not Orthodox, and as Hopko says, when he wrote, "books in English about the Orthodox Church, and Eastern Christianity generally, scarcely could fill a shelf in one small seminary bookcase." (Although, I should note, it is suspicious that St. Vladimir's changed the original subtitle of the book, to remove "Fathers" and to incorrectly claim that this is a general history of the early Church, which it is not, except as discussed through the lives of the ten men profiled here.)

Payne is at frequent pains to emphasize how Orthodoxy stresses "the imitation of divine nature," and therefore the ultimate goal of *theosis*, divinization, union with the energies of God, the "fire" of God. In its nature, such a goal is impossible for us to truly understand, which lends both a numinous feel to Orthodoxy, and a feeling of some ambiguity. These feelings are missing in Western, that is, Roman Catholic, practice. As Payne says, by contrast "In the West there is the need for hard outlines and clear definitions: the long straight Roman roads still haunt our minds." This is not to say that Western Christianity does not draw on the eastern Fathers; Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, relied heavily

on them, and even John Donne, Payne tells us, frequently quoted from them. But most of all what comes through in this book is the different feel of Orthodoxy, even though doctrinally, really, Orthodoxy differs little from Catholic, Roman, Christianity.

The eastern Fathers all lived in a small area, the eastern Mediterranean. Not a one of the cities in which they lived, and which in some cases they dominated with their force of will, has more than a small Christian presence today. But in the early years of Christianity, the new religion rapidly became the foremost cultural element, in a way hard for us to grasp, in our culture where all claimed morality is Christian, or pseudo-Christian, but the religion itself is mostly ignored or, increasingly, once again persecuted. “[I]n these fine-spun imaginations lit with the orient sun Christ is seen more clearly and more sharply than in the West. It is not only that they were nearer to Jerusalem and Nazareth, but they were closer to the habits of thought of the earliest Christians. They knew, as we shall never know, how men went about their affairs when Christianity was no more than a young shoot, though from the tree of Jesse. The face of Jesus had left a shining in the air; almost they could see His face; and in His pathways they walked in fear and trembling, for almost they could see His shadow at the turning of the road.”

For all these men, Payne sketches his milieu, bringing it to life, and placing each man's life and work within its proper frame. This is what makes the book successful, because a mere recitation of historical happenings, especially those laden with theology, would soon enough have become a slog. We begin with Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215). Clement was a Roman citizen (though himself a Greek) and a convert, who had intimate familiarity from his prior life with pagan mystery cults, which is no doubt why his first major work is a call to reject paganism. Payne sees Clement as the first Christian synthesizer, the first to attempt, in a series of works, a coherent explanation of Christian doctrine, with a strong emphasis on the daily practice of a Christian life. Clement was also, in the same way as several of the very early Fathers, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, especially Platonism. A besetting question, perhaps the besetting question, of Orthodox thought is to what degree God can be known, and this question closely relates to the life of Christ on earth. Clement's thought was the first to address this question, which often divided the early Church, in a systematic way. Yet Clement is not a

saint in Orthodoxy (though he is in the Coptic Church), and it appears that several of his lost works shaded close to heresies of various sorts. Maybe that's natural enough, given that he went first.

Next is another man not a saint, in any tradition, nor actually a Father of the Church, Clement's star pupil, Origen (c. 185–c. 253). Origen was fantastically prolific, writing numerous books ranging from theological treatises to apologetics. As far as the latter, the works of Celsus, an early enemy of Christianity, are known only from Origen's response *Against Celsus*. This work is interesting because it reminds us that Christianity has always faced robust intellectual attacks, not just persecution, and that modern attacks such as that of the so-called New Atheists are both not new and are inferior in quality and competence to earlier, long-rebutted attacks such as those of Celsus. Origen also created the massive *Hexapla*, a comparison of six translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek, and a great deal else that influenced those who came after him. Like Clement, Origen's life was affected by the intermittent Roman persecutions—he did not die a martyr, though he may have died from the aftereffects of torture. But his glowing reputation, based on his undoubted brilliance, declined in the centuries after his death, as Christian doctrine solidified in a way that rejected many of his speculations. Today he is remembered primarily for what Payne calls his optimism, exemplified in his tendency towards universalism—that is, the belief, or at least the hope, that all men will ultimately be reunited with God, a thread that runs throughout much Orthodox thought, to a degree not found in the West.

The greatest of the Christological controversies of the early Church revolved around the heresy of Arianism—the claim, by one Arius, that Jesus Christ was a created being, greater than us, but lesser than God. As Hilaire Belloc analyzes in his *The Great Heresies*, Arianism was attractive, especially among the Roman military, because it made Christianity a less mysterious religion, easier for men to understand, less of a leap to believe. Christ as hero is a lot easier to wrap your mind around than Christ as God. We cannot really understand how Christ is, in the words of the Nicene Creed promulgated in an attempt to end the controversy, both “true God and true man,” and one easy solution is to decide that He is not. Athanasius (c. 298–373) was the most implacable opponent of Arianism, and the man whose steadfastness contributed most to

its ultimate defeat. Among many other reasons, this controversy is important, because Constantine, the first Christian emperor, directly involved himself in its resolution, in part by calling and overseeing the Council of Nicea, the first of the seven ecumenical councils which to this day set the core doctrine of the Orthodox Church.

Like most of these men, Athanasius did not have a peaceful life, even though pagan persecution had ended, at least within the Roman Empire. In part this was personality; the men Payne profiles were not capable of bending, and when they involved themselves in controversies with the powerful, the resulting clashes were always spectacular. For Athanasius, the problem was that Constantine's successors were not as strongly anti-Arian (and even Constantine wavered), or worse, in the case of Julian the Apostate, anti-Christian. More than once Athanasius was exiled from Alexandria, his home base. But he died in his bed, and soon was honored as the man who saved the Church.

Next is Basil the Great (330–379), an icon of whom, as it happens, we have just added to the icon corner in our own home. Basil was one of the three “Cappadocian Fathers,” along with his brother Gregory of Nyssa and his friend Gregory Nazianzen. (The brothers’ mother was Saint Emmelia; five of her ten children are venerated as saints.) All three are absolutely central to the Orthodox Church, but largely ignored in the West. Basil was both bishop and monastic, and one of the originators of rule-based communal, or cenobitic, monasticism (in contrast to the earlier tradition of isolated, or eremitic, monasticism, exemplified by Saint Anthony and other Desert Fathers). Basil contributed to the fight against Arianism and was a great theologian, while at the same time he showed great practical ability, especially in poor relief and other charitable works. Among other accomplishments, Basil started the first free public hospital ever known. He was both a thinker and a doer, a rare combination. Payne paints Basil as an aggressive, in the best sense, and a proud man. In many ways he seems like the sort of man who would have been, in a different time, a successful entrepreneur. After all, every successful entrepreneur must have, if not a touch of sociopathy, at least a little of the bull in a china shop, and this Basil had. It wore him out, and he died relatively young.

By contrast, perhaps a contrast exaggerated by Payne, we have Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), Basil's younger brother. He took a

winding path to sainthood, not as devout as early as his brother, and marrying—although his first book recommends against marriage. “Characteristically, it is the pain and suffering accompanying marriage which he dwells on: the woman in labor, her despair when she loses her child, the husband’s despair leading to madness if his wife perishes.” (One often hears the claim that before the modern era men and women were less emotional about early death because it was more common. Passages like this show that’s completely false. Our ancestors got on with life because they had to, but they saw the death of a child or a beloved spouse no different than we did.)

As did most of the men Payne profiles, Gregory wrote extensively, including on the vision of God, whether and to what degree the infinite God can be apprehended, in this life or the next, a common theme in Orthodox writing, but still developing at this point. His writing, though, was gentle and joyous. He was made a bishop, but did not want to be one. He tried to stay away from cities, and he is the author of the famous passage about Constantinople: “A city full of profound theological disputes, everyone talking and preaching in the squares, in the market places, at the cross-roads, in the alleyways: old clothes men, money-changers, coster-mongers: they are all at it. If you ask a man to change a piece of silver, he informs you wherein the Son differs from the Father; and if you ask for the price of a loaf, you are told by way of reply that the Son is the inferior of the Father; and if you inquire whether the bath is ready, the man solemnly informs you that the Son was made out of nothing.”

The third of the three Cappadocian Fathers was Gregory Nazianzen (c. 329–390), friend to Basil and the other Gregory, and known as “the Theologian,” the only one of all eastern Fathers to be so named. (We should note that, in general, in the Orthodox tradition, theologians are not those who trained for years or decades to build an internally-coherent written structure in the Augustinian mold; they are rather those who were best able to, in this life, commune with God, and write down the fruits of that communion.) He studied at Athens and was friends with the young Julian, later the Apostate, and again, himself came a little late to total devotion to Christ. He didn’t want to be a priest, he didn’t want to be a bishop, but he became both, the latter when pressured by Basil, who appears to have rarely taken “no” for an answer. When Basil died, in 379, Gregory retired to solitude, only to reemerge a few months

later in Constantinople, offering five fiery sermons on the Trinity, still regarded as perhaps the finest expositions of that absolutely essential core doctrine (that's why Mormons are not Christians). His thoughts on the Trinity revolved around the incomprehensible nature of God. He was made, again unwillingly, bishop of the imperial city, but fell afoul of the powerful and the jealous, and once more retired to obscurity, dying a few years later. His relics were stolen by the Crusaders in 1204, in the Fourth Crusade, and Payne tells us that they "rest in the Vatican, in the Chapel of St. Gregory designed by Michelangelo." As it happens, Pope John Paul II returned those relics to Constantinople, to the Ecumenical Patriarch, in 2004. I don't see much chance of healing the schism between East and West, especially as Rome, under the execrable Jorge Bergoglio, adopts the heresy of Modernism wholesale, but that was at least a nice gesture.

We conclude with four other men. John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), whom I have very recently discussed so I will not discuss again. (Pseudo-) Dionysius the Aeropagite, who lived around the turn of the sixth century and wrote mystical treatises. He, in part, originated apophatic theology, the attempt to determine what God is by saying what He is not. Such an approach is tied to the Orthodox rejection of univocity, the belief that God in his essence shares any characteristic in common with created beings, something accepted by some of the medieval Schoolmen, and which many believe has had massive deleterious consequences, because it tends to cast God as demiurge. Still, Dionysius was very popular in the West for a time in the Middle Ages, but as Hopko says, his speculations about angelic orders, on which Payne focuses, though they form much of today's popular conception of angels, are not his most relevant work. Then John of Damascus (c. 675–749), an Arab living soon after the Muslim conquest of Damascus, who served the caliph as an administrator before leaving to become a monk, and who wrote *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, the first complete summary of Orthodox thought.

Finally, we wrap up with Gregory Palamas (c. 1296–1359), monk of Mount Athos, the last of the Fathers to be so recognized. He brought Orthodox thought about the nature and apprehension of God to its final form, distinguishing clearly between God's essence, which man can never apprehend, in this life or the next, and his energies, toward

which man can infinitely progress in the process of *theosis*, and which can even be sometimes directly apprehended in this life, to those few men given the gift to see the Light of Tabor, the uncreated light made visible to Peter, James, and John in the Transfiguration. In Orthodoxy, the Transfiguration is a far more important event than it is in the West, which instead emphasizes the Crucifixion. The Orthodox focus is part and parcel of the Orthodox emphasis on Christ as victor, triumphing over death and sin, making His glory manifest. In the West, by contrast, there is rather endless talk of Christ's suffering and ruminations on supposed atonement. There is not any core doctrinal difference here, instead a difference of emphasis, but this is a crucial part of the different feel of Orthodoxy and Catholicism.

Payne concludes better than I could. "So they pass before us, the gentle Clement, the stern Origen, the steel-hard Athanasius, the three great Cappadocian Fathers somehow combining into a single figure, fulfilling one another, then the golden stream pouring from the mouth of Chrysostom, and afterward the dark cell where Dionysius the Areopagite stands before the beckoning light; dark-faced John Damascene in his eagle's eyrie; Gregory Palamas striding across the marble floors of the palaces of Constantinople, then vanishing to Mount Athos, the eternal repetition of the Name of Jesus and the ceaseless vigil before the Light of the Transfiguration; and as we watch them, all of them seem to be bathed in the blinding light that shone on Mount Tabor."

There will never be such men again in Christianity, because Christianity is no longer young, and there is no need for such men, with their inspired thought, to freshly illuminate the paths on which to follow Christ. If, ten thousand years from now, the Solar Imperium stretches from Mercury to the Oort Cloud, these men will still be the core of developed Christian belief. And from me, today, for once, there are no grand lessons to apply, no political battles to be fought, no enemies to be put down. Yes, the battles in our time, spiritual and temporal, must be fought. Quietism, too broadly applied across a society, is a type of heresy. All these men, certainly, fought great battles without flinching. But for today, in this season set aside for contemplation, there is just the example of these men, each of whom changed, and continues to change, the world.