

PATRISTIC THERAPY FOR WESTERN “BAGGAGE” (THE PATRISTIC WITNESS OF ORTHODOX PHILOSOPHER-THEOLOGIAN IVAN KIREYEVSKY, 1806-1856)

by

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My homily today is focused on the patristic witness of the extremely spiritual Russian philosopher-lay theologian, Ivan Kireyevsky, who was “a disciple of the great Staretzi of Optina Monastery”. He wonderfully transmitted this patristic tradition as did his contemporary lay theologian Alexei Khomiakov. Blessed Fr. Seraphim Rose, himself a disciple of the Optina tradition, referred to the spiritual witness of the “devout layman Ivan Kireyevsky” in *The Orthodox Word*, Sept – Oct., 1973:

We, the last Christians, find ourselves in the midst of temptations far worse than he faced, and we do not have among us the God-fearing Staretzi and great theologians whom he knew. We know that we cannot trust our own theological wisdom, any more than we can trust our own sanctity. And so we can only thank God that He has given us as a guide in these last days such great lanterns of sanctity and theology as Staretz Paissy, the Optina Staretzi, and Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, *as well as the devout layman Ivan Kireyevsky* (emphasis supplied), who faced and resolved the basic spiritual and intellectual problems that even more critically face the Orthodox believer today. May their words and example truly be fruitful among us.¹

Much of my comments will draw heavily on Fr. Alexey Young’s short, but excellent spiritual biography, *A Man Is His Faith: Ivan Kireyevsky and Orthodox Christianity*, and all quotations of Kireyevsky are taken from Fr. Alexey’s work, and so I acknowledge these now.

Ivan Kireyevsky experienced Orthodoxy as few can. Although his earlier years were not indicative of how spiritual he would become [as is true with many, if not most of us], he eventually absorbed the essence of Holy Orthodoxy as few Orthodox laymen ever do. He is to be compared with the great lay theologian Alexei Khomiakov in terms of his spiritual witness. Ivan had been heavily influenced by the West, which was the ‘fashion’ in his day, but then he came to know and experience Orthodoxy and discovered the answer to life through the writings of the Fathers of the Church. He was a philosopher of the first degree, who discovered that Patristic Philosophy was all one needed:

Kireyevsky saw that apart from these Holy Fathers man needs no philosophy whatever because the Orthodox world-view is all-encompassing and is not at all the sphere of ‘theologians’, much less of a theology which is *divorced* (emphasis supplied) from actual life..²

True Orthodoxy accepts Patristic ‘philosophy’ as opposed to the arid wasteland of Western external ‘religion’! In the nonOrthodox West, Roman Catholics, the first Protestants, and the Reformation Protestants, are ‘peas in a pod’ really. The errors of the former have been inherited so-to-speak by the latter. Thus, the nonOrthodox West has de-spiritualised Christianity and made it fit, correspond with, adhere to, the secular world instead of maintaining Orthodox spiritual purity. In the West, we are consumed with fitting in with society, the religious organisation has been shaped to conform to the contours of society. Nothing could have been further from our Saviour’s teachings:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (1. John 2:15)

...

If the world hate you, ye know it hated Me before it hated you. (St. John 15:18)

In the nonOrthodox West, our lives are consumed with the latest fads and fashions from the ‘Hollyweird’ set. We do not see our lives as an organic whole but instead much as an actor views his career. The actor’s portfolio or body of work he becomes known for and associated with consists of a series of parts, all differentiated from each other. They are his repertoire. Similarly, in our private lives, the Westerner tends to compartmentalise his activities. We have a variety of hats including a work hat, home hat, play away from home, and perhaps a religious hat. The spiritual one is many times limited to a particular hour of the week, or, at least, day. But we don’t consider becoming Christ like to be a fulltime job. Do we?

We are not too serious about our inner spirituality. Of course, if we are into the latest New Age syncretistic mode, we probably tend to engage in some pagan encounter such as Buddhism and/or ‘get into’ yoga, but into Christ? Not usually for our Western rationalistic individual.

We are absorbed with externalities though. How we look, what we wear, what we eat, our weight, our complexion, what kind and year of car or SUV we drive, ad nauseam. We want self-satisfaction, and endlessly seek some form of pleasure. And, of course, it goes without saying that any kind of pain or discomfort is to be avoided!

We listen and watch prosperity preachers like Pastor Joel Osteen and others of a similar ilk perhaps to obtain some perceived sense of justification for our selfish behaviour. It is likely that we are in a state of self deception (prelest). We are quite ‘satisfied’ with ourselves, which is the antithesis of True Christianity.

We don’t believe in anything called truth because we have been propagandised by the messengers of the antichrist, who looms on the horizon, and told that everything is relative: there is no truth. We rely on reason and our own efforts. After all, we’ve been told over and over again that “we’re worth it”

How different this is from the One Holy Catholic & Apostolic Church:

St. John of Kronstadt

Afflictions are a great teacher; they show us our weaknesses, vices, and need of repentance; they cleanse the soul, and sober it, as from drunkenness; they bring down grace; they soften the hard heart, they inspire us with a loathing for sin, and strengthen us in faith, hope, and virtue.³

The Christian world is not of this world:

St. Macarius the Great

The world of Christians is one thing – their way of living, their mind and speech, and action, is one – and the way of living, and mind and speech and action of the men of *this* (emphasis supplied) world is another.⁴

To strive to be like Kireyevsky⁵ is to be closer to true Orthodox Christianity. We have a choice, to follow Christ's Way or the way of this world. We must continually work, striving and struggling to transform ourselves with God's grace. Kireyevsky's message is that

it is in the **fullness of our being**, and not in any of its *separate* (emphasis supplied) parts, that we may experience God, an experience which leads to perfection and salvation. He showed us that to achieve this we must first see ourselves as we really are, totally naked before God. With this as a beginning we can then start to clothe ourselves with elements of a righteous God-pleasing way of life soundly based upon patristic philosophy.⁶

Alexei Khomiakov, the great lay theologian, wrote the following after Kireyevsky's death for the *Russian Biographical Dictionary*:

His was a heart filled with gentleness and love, a mind enriched by all of the enlightenment of our own era, the transparent purity of a meek soul devoid of malice, a kind of special sensitivity which gave charm to his conversation, a fervent striving towards the truth, an exceptional refinement of dialectic during arguments, combined with the most conscientious deference when his opponent was correct, and gentle mercy when the weakness of his opponent was clear, a quiet joy always ready for an inoffensive jest, an innate repulsion from everything crude and offensive, a faithful devotion in friendship, a readiness to forgive his enemies and be sincerely reconciled with them, a profound hatred of vice and an extreme condescension when judging corrupt people; and finally, a nobleness without reproach, which not only allowed no spot or suspicion in himself but sincerely

suffered from every lack of nobility in others: such were the rare and invaluable characteristics of Ivan Kireyevsky.⁷

Kireyevsky did not dislike the rationalistic West. Instead, he should be considered as its truly Orthodox physician. He described the West's illness, its symptoms and causes, without rancour.⁸ Are we similar to this Western malaise, caught up in thinking and relishing the modern world and its many gadgets, rather than doing anything about our spiritual lives? We can change. After all Paul did. Our therapy is CHRIST! All we need is to accept Christ as a child would, freely, fully, wholeheartedly, without reservations and immerse ourselves in Holy Scripture and the teachings of Christ as given to the Apostles and as delivered through the ages by the Fathers of the One Holy Catholic & Apostolic Church. But it is up to each and every one of us, man, woman and child alike. Let's begin, shall we?

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Cited in Fr. Alexey Young, *A Man Is His Faith*, Saint George Information Service, London, 1980, p. 7.

² *ibid.*

³ *id.*, quoted on p. 23.

⁴ *id.*, p. 41.

⁵ And like Alexei Khomiakov.

⁶ *id.*, p. 63.

⁷ *id.*

⁸ *id.*, p. 33.