



Great Lent

A spiritual journey to
the end of the *old* and the
beginning of the *new*



The Death of God and the Resurrection of Man*

*The Orthodox response
to the existentialist declaration of the “death of God”
is the Gospel of the Resurrection of Man*

by Panagiotes Nellas († April 6, 1986)

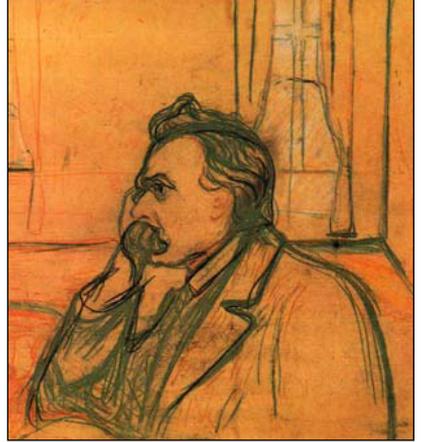
*A small memorial tribute on the twentieth anniversary
of the repose of this ever-memorable theologian*

THE “DEATH OF GOD” is one of the central themes not only of contemporary Western philosophy and literature, but even of its theology. In recent years, thousands of pages have been written on the “death of God,” theatrical productions have been mounted, and tapes have been published; the subject is no longer the preserve of experts and now concerns the wider public. The aim of this brief essay is, first, to provide some general information about the phenomenon in question and a commentary thereon, and then, after putting it on the basis of Orthodox criteria, to outline the contribution that Orthodoxy could make to the discussion of this subject.



IN THE DOMAIN of philosophy, the subject begins with Nietzsche, for whom, as is well known, the death of God is revealed through, and is at the same time synonymous with, the overturning of all values, of the entire supersensible realm, and of the whole world of ideas and ideals. For Nietzsche, man, the *Übermensch* (lit. “Overman”), remains the sole and supreme value: “Where is God?” he writes, as early as 1882.

I will tell you. We have killed Him. All of us are his murderers.... God is dead.... God will remain dead. What are the churches if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?



Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

In his day, Nietzsche was compelled to place these words in the mouth of a madman. Sartre, however, at the beginning of the Second World War, repeats the same proclamation with complete candor while addressing a public gathering in Geneva: “Gentlemen, God is dead. I announce to you, gentlemen, the death of God.”

What the death of God means for atheistic existentialist philosophy is clearly revealed to us by its corresponding literature. Since God does not exist, biological life is all that there is. With Dionysian exultation Camus extols in his early works the grandeur and joy of this life—the inherent beauty of a warm day at the seashore, a wintry night, with the family gathered round the hearth. But biological life is life “in decay” and Camus himself, as he progresses, discloses this canker of decay in life that robs it of joy and drains its essence, leaving it flat and meaningless, and creates in man a sense of chaos and emptiness, something which he describes with such intensity in *L'Étranger* (The Stranger) and which Sartre so aptly denominates in his work of the same name, *La Nausée* (Nausea).

Existentialist man perceives death not as something remote, something that awaits him at the end of his life, but as something that exists within him. The Damoclean sword of death hangs unremittingly over him and within him, mutilates his dreams, cleaves his noblest endeavor

ors in half, and restricts the scope of his existence to the point of stifling it. Man is, as Camus says, another Sisyphos, who strives to roll the precious rock of his life to the top of a hill: no sooner does he come close to reaching his goal than the rock slips away from him and hurtles back down to the bottom. He feels forsaken and desolate. Condemned to see, he understands and becomes aware that he is living in absurdity. Heidegger admits that man finds himself, without intending it, thrown (*geworfen*) and abandoned (*verlassen*) in a corner of the universe, obligated to live.



Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

Through this taste of the void in his soul, contemporary man finds himself faced with the centuries-old proclamation of later Western Christianity, which offers as a solution to the misery of earthly life the promise of the bliss of life after death, and which regards life here on earth almost exclusively as the domain in which by works (Roman Catholics) or faith (Protestants) one becomes or does not become worthy to inherit eternity.

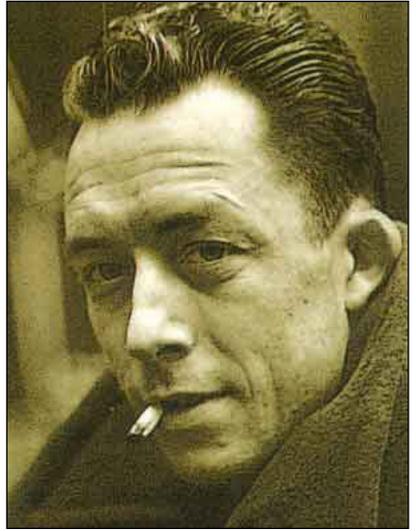
However, contemporary man stands with abhorrence before this outlook, which makes an excessive distinction between time and eternity, between earthly and heavenly life, and which drastically relativizes the significance of the former,

‘If there is a sin against life,’ writes Camus, ‘it consists not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life, to allow the implacable grandeur of a putative eternal life to rob us of our love for real life.’

So, in the name of quotidian, palpable life, Camus refuses to believe in another life—a beautiful, even eternal, and yet, for all that, an other life.

On this point Sartre is more absolute. Belief in another life, he says, is precisely what brings death to this life and is tantamount to suicide. And, advertising his doubt regarding God Himself, he asserts that a God who does not take man’s earthly life seriously, who is not interested in his concrete historical problems, but degrades human life to a period of propitiation and satisfaction of Divine justice,

may well be just, but is certainly not a loving God. He is an egotistical and sadistic father, who is content to see his child suffering torments and imploring him to be so good as to offer him salvation, when he so desires. But such salvation is unacceptable to contemporary, adult man—as he characterizes himself—and such a father is useless to him. It is preferable, according to this view, for a child to sever all relations with his father and to endeavor to achieve salvation on his own. For this reason, Sartre—who was unacquainted with the teaching of the Eastern Orthodox



Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Church concerning Divine-human synergy, according to which faith does not oppress man, but enables him to grow and brings him to perfection—emphasizes categorically that faith in a just, but sadistic deity degrades, debases, and denatures man.

A logical consequence of this viewpoint is that, in order for man to be free and authentic, God must not exist. In his chilling work, ironically entitled *Le Diable et le bon dieu* (The Devil and the good God) the central hero, after an agonizing quest for happiness with the Devil and with God, is portrayed as concluding:

I exist..., I alone. I have been begging for a sign all this time, but have not received any reply. Heaven does not even know my name. I have been asking at every moment what I could be in God's eyes. Now I know: nothing. God does not see me; God does not hear me; God does not know me. Do you see this void over our heads? It is God. This corrosion in the door? It is God. This hole in the ground? It is God. Silence, it is God. Absence, it is God. Human loneliness, it is God. All this time, there has been nothing but I. I decided on evil. I alone found the good. I sinned. I performed the acts of kindness that I performed. Today I accuse myself, and only I can forgive myself. I am man. If God exists, man is nothing. But God does not exist. Joy, tears of joy. Alleluia. God does not exist.

And when he sees Hilda, a woman whom he had previously been afraid of even looking at for fear of sin, walking onto the stage, he takes her by the hands and exclaims to her:

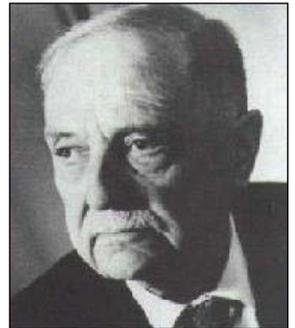
God is dead. We no longer have anyone to watch us. I alone can see your hair and your face. O, how real you are to me, now that God doesn't exist. At last we're alone.

These texts show clearly that the greater part of contemporary existentialist philosophy and literature endeavors to exalt man independently of God or in opposition to Him, a phenomenon which is due, as we have seen, to the mistaken idea that God does not care about man and does not love him, but punishes and degrades him. It is not without significance that these are precisely the texts that have nourished the younger generation in Europe.

In America, in turn, the same reaction against the God of today's Christians and the conventional religious life of our time has been displayed, chiefly during the preceding decade [the 1960s], in a way that is, we might say, more visceral, through those rebellious young people who cry out:

Gentlemen, the God that you speak to us about is not alive, and your very life is dead. A God who does not impinge on our existence, who has no connection with our body, is useless to us. We could accept Jesus, who spoke about love. Your own God is useful simply because he makes you feel comfortable. You use him as you wish, just as we use marijuana. If there is a God, let him come and find us where we are. Otherwise, there is no God.

This challenge from contemporary man has, quite naturally, caused consternation in the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and Western theology has attempted to respond to it. The hopeful movement among some—mainly French—theologians to return to the sources and, by placing the concept of sacred history at the center of their theological inquiries, to bring about a profound Biblical, liturgical, and Patristic renewal, was not to last. It seems that this movement has, in fact, been bypassed by modernists who, enticed by contemporary trends and looking at matters in superficial way,

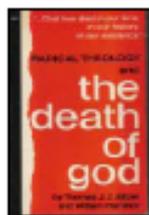


Rudolf Bultmann
(1884-1976)

created, in line with philosophy and literature, the so-called “death of God theology.”

There are two basic trajectories in this school of thought: the first is that of Bultmann, who, influenced primarily by Heidegger, sees the essence of Christianity in the relationship between God and man, which brings, or rather, which is salvation. The historical dimension of Christianity becomes, on this view, entirely secondary, and the historical Jesus, and the life, the miracles, and the very Resurrection of Christ are a myth, that is, one of the many ways in which the essence of Christianity can be expressed. Since, today, modes of expression, language, and civilization have changed, the way in which this essence is expressed must also change. Such is the famous theory of “demythologization.”

The extreme consequences of this line of thinking are revealed and upheld by the second trajectory, according to which, if the Church is to be in a position to approach contemporary, secularized man, it must pose some basic questions regarding the concept of God, engage in serious reflection on the reality of the Mysteries and the Church, grapple with the fundamental issue of whether God is any longer to be found in the thought forms and narratives of the Gospel and in the ideas and doctrines of the Church, and not rather in the real world: that is to say, whether the most authentic mystery today, the true work of the people, the contemporary Christian liturgy (“work of the people”) should be not the Divine Eucharist, but rather love for one’s neighbor, political involvement, and collective action for social justice. On these problems books have been written with such titles as: *God Without God*, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, *The New Essence of Christianity*, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*, etc.



II

NOW, what might the attitude of the Eastern Orthodox Church be towards this many-sided and polysemous phenomenon of the “death of God”? As with every issue, here, too, it cannot but be at the same time both critical and constructive.

In endeavoring to interpret the phenomenon of atheistic humanism, the Orthodox inquirer discovers that it has to do, in essence, with the sin of Adam and that the process of the development of contem-

porary atheism recapitulates, in its central lineaments, the process of the Fall, as the texts themselves reveal.

Holy Scripture teaches that God fashioned Adam and assigned him the vocation of becoming united with Him. The purpose of man was to be elevated to a God-man. In order for this to come about, Adam would have had to be correctly oriented, to be positively disposed towards God, and to walk the path that would lead to Him. But the Devil succeeded in persuading Adam that God envied him and wanted to keep him as His slave, and in this way he incited man to rebellion and lured him onto another path that would supposedly lead him directly to deification and make him some kind of autonomous deity. This path, however, was essentially non-existent, and so Adam's change of course was not, in reality, anything other than a derailment into overwhelming emptiness. Far from the realm in which the life-giving word of God is heard (ἀκούγεται), in the land of disobedience (ἀν-υπακοῆς), man found himself far removed also from true life. He lost the "breath of life" that God gave him when he was created. He became once more "dust of the earth" (Genesis 2:7), degrading himself to mere biological life, a life of decay, which is death. Gloom and darkness, the dominance of instincts, the stress of self-preservation thenceforth made men, far removed from God, detestable and hostile to each other. Cain killed Abel, and the humanist Sartre discovers, to his horror, that "Hell is other people" ("l'enfer, c'est les autres").

The promise of autonomous humanism thus demonstrates that it is diabolical provocation that makes man banish God from his world:

I want people everywhere—around me, above me—, people who will conceal heaven from me (Sartre).

However, the expulsion of God inevitably leaves a terrifying void in the world:

I have killed God, because he separated me from men, but look, his death makes this separation final (Sartre).

The humanitarian attitude of the doctor in Camus' *La Peste* (The Plague) thus quickly gives way to indifference towards all men and all things in *L'Étranger*. The description of the macabre void of death is completed in *Unburied Dead*, while the disintegration of life is revealed in all of its tragedy in works like Sartre's *Le Mur* (The wall) and Beckett's *En Attendant Godot* (Waiting for Godot).

- What day is it today? (asks one of the tramps in this work.)
- Thursday.
- He said he'd come on Thursday.
- And what if today is Friday?
- It might be Tuesday.
- You say we have to come back tomorrow?
- Yes, but let's bring a rope as well.
- What if he doesn't come?
- We'll hang ourselves.
- And if he comes?
- We'll be saved.

And shortly afterwards:

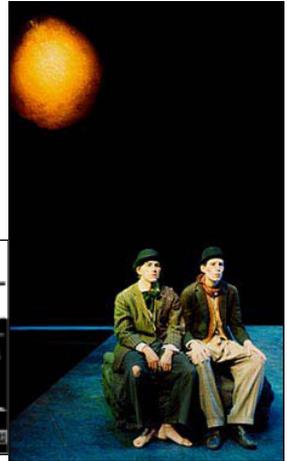
- We're inexhaustible.
- It's so we won't think.
- We always find something to give us the impression we exist.
- We exist, yes, we exist, this age-old plight.

“They are always talking about leaving,” says one critic, “and they always sit there in that vacant spot. Moreover, it does not matter whether they leave or where they stay. It is the same thing, for nothing will ever change. Anywhere else, there is nothing but motionless death, and here there is nothing but deadly immobility.”

In this way it becomes evident that in their endeavor to kill God, Adam and contemporary atheists succeed only in killing man. By alienating themselves from communion with God, they lose the center of their life, remaining homeless, desolate, and dead. Their very texts, while speaking about the death of God, actually demonstrate nothing other than the death of man. It appears that the question, “To be, or not to be?” has found an answer in our era: “To be, and not to be.”

Now, with regard to the effort of Western theology to resolve the acute problem concerning God, the Orthodox inquirer finds himself forced to admit, in all sincerity, that, no matter how attractive he might find this effort, the solution offered by Western theology turns out, in the light of Orthodox Tradition, to be unsuccessful and fraught with danger.

It is, of course, a fundamental obligation for any theologian to speak the language of his time. To rephrase the Christian message is



an inalienable right bestowed by Christ, through St. Paul, on every age, and validated by the praxis of the Fathers of the fourth and the fourteenth centuries. But fidelity to the historicity of Christ, that is, to the fact that the Word of God became truly and really man in the time of Cæsar Augustus and that He was crucified, died, and rose again, and, even though He ascended, continues to exist truly, really, and



historically, through the Mysteries, in the Church, which constitutes His historical Body unto the ages—this is the kernel of Christianity. Western theologians of the “death of God” school are in danger of rejecting this very kernel.

In their well-intentioned and noble attempt to approach the irreligious man of today, instead of getting to the heart of the matter and offering man the true God, Western theologians cling to the surface. They successively abandon religion, the Church, and Christ, arriving at a God without Christ, a disincarnate God, an idea, which may well be a God of the philosophers, but certainly cannot be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God Who saves. Thus, while this theology may be relevant to our times, it does not preach salvation, and, notwithstanding the sympathy that an Orthodox Christian might have for its intentions, he cannot but emphasize that, if it ultimately prevails in the West, it will inevitably spell the end of Western Christianity.

However, aside from this critical danger, it should be stressed that the theology of this school is incapable of engaging in any substantial debate with atheism. This is because the solution that it proposes is superficial and theoretical, does not touch on the essence of things, and does not eliminate, even in the least, the fundamental misunderstandings of God and man that have led to the revolt of humanism against God.

The contemporary existentialist movement persistently and single-mindedly quests after the true meaning of life and a meaningful destiny for man. But the theology of the death of God, instead of elevating man, secularizes God, and thus ineluctably degrades man still further. In this cycle of degeneration that is created, the motion is centrifugal, such that it detaches Western thought, both philosophical and theological, all the more from the reality of salvation, which is

the historical reconstitution and resurrection of man, that which confers meaning, unity, and immortality on his one and only life, which is at the same time earthly and heavenly.

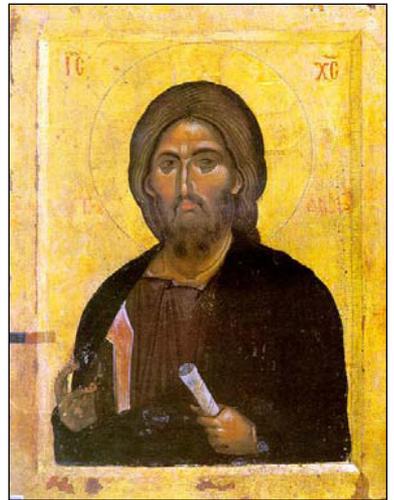
It is at this point that the central weakness of Western thought is exposed: that is, the separation of, and antithesis between the historical and the transcendent, the earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the eternal. All that we have said up to now has shown that later Western theology devalued the historical for the sake of the transcendent, that humanism, going to the other extreme, rejected the transcendent so as to preserve the historical, and that modern Western theology, in order to approach humanism, preaches a new, almost totally secularized God. Thus, Western Christianity is gravely estranged from its roots, and there is an urgent need for Orthodoxy to intervene.

III

HOWEVER, what might the contribution of Orthodoxy be to the resolution of this problem? Within the limits of an essay, it is not possible to offer a complete and detailed response. After presenting and commenting on this phenomenon, what we can do next is to provide the framework for a solution, a new perspective in which the problem may be understood more fully and resolved more satisfactorily: that is, we can set out some basic and necessary presuppositions for the resolution of this problem.

This new perspective which Orthodoxy offers can be characterized from the outset not as compartmentalized and fragmentary, but as synthetic and catholic. In this perspective, instead of being separated or distinguished, things are mutually complementary and united. This is clearly evident in

the three antinomies: eternity or time; the future life or the present life; God or man. As we have seen, these antinomies lie at the root of the problem of the death of God and have beleaguered the West in recent decades.



For the West, this beleaguerment is natural and unavoidable, because from the moment that the realities which constitute the foregoing antinomies are separated and placed before man in opposition to each other, they lose their authenticity and turn into two fearful crucibles, in such a way that, whichever one of them man prefers to fall into, he founders. In the Orthodox perspective, by contrast, these realities coexist, the one defining the other and at the same time being complemented by the other.

Yannis Xenakis said some time ago that one of the greatest problems that he faces in composing his music is the unidimensional conception of time that we have at our disposal, the rectilinear partition of time into past, present, and future. He used to speculate on the new avenues that would be opened up in music, and also in other areas of human creativity, if there were another conception of time that would transcend our familiar scheme of things.

But this other conception does exist. The time in which the Divine Liturgy is celebrated has the past, as well as the present and the future, truly at work in it. In the Orthodox Tradition, the meaning of time resides precisely in the fact that it defines, reifies, and reveals eternity, whereas, on the other hand, eternity fulfills time and constitutes its end, that is, its goal and its content.

This relationship is revealed with greater clarity in the second antinomy, that is, in what pertains to the future and the past life of man. For Orthodoxy, the life of man is single and unitary; it is the life of one and the same person, which begins to exist here and continues to exist, without any interruption, in Heaven. Thus, the future life does not obliterate or relativize the present life, but, on the contrary, gives it meaning and continuity, since what we do in this life is not fortuitous or fragmentary, but is something destined to abide also in the next life. This is the view of Holy Scripture, according to which man is not a soul imprisoned in a body, that is, a soul that will begin to live once it is freed from the body, but a person who begins to live at a particular moment of time and is called, not to die, but to live forever. "Soul," as is well known, means, in the language of Holy Scripture, true, eternal life, and the verse "what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" means: "what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own life?" or "what can one give a man in exchange for his life?"

Thus, it becomes obvious that Camus' resistance to accepting the future life, which we saw as stemming from the fact that he perceives

no connection between the future life and life here on earth, collapses when the matter is viewed from this perspective. Indeed, from such a standpoint his exclamation when he read Lossky's book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, is telling: "Now at last we can have a discussion with Christianity."

The effectuality of this catholic, Orthodox perspective is evident also in the elimination of the third antinomy, in the abolition of the rivalry between God and man. The teaching of the Orthodox Fathers of the East on this subject regards man as the "glory," that is, the manifestation and the image of God. This means that, for Orthodoxy, man is truly and really the revelation of God in time and, simultaneously, that man finds his wholeness and fullness only in God. That God formed man "in His image" means, for the Orthodox Fathers, that He formed man with the destiny of becoming united with Him.

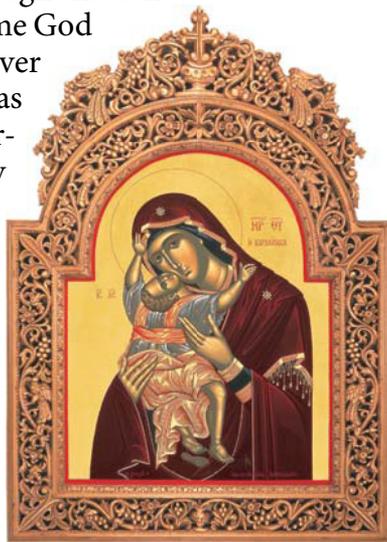
Man, says St. Basil the Great, is "bidden to be God." He tends towards God and is called to elevate himself to God, to become a God-man.

'Indeed, it was for the sake of the new Man [the God-Man],' writes Nicholas Cabasilas, speaking to the humanists of the fourteenth century, 'that human nature was formed at the beginning, and for Him both mind and desire were fashioned. We received reason, in order that we might know Christ, and desire, in order that we might run towards Him; we have memory, in order that we might bear Him within us, since He Himself was the archetype for us when we were being created.'

This is the reason why, according to the same Father, the God-Man is the supreme "resting place of human yearnings," the ultimate pinnacle of our aspirations. Thus, the God-Man, Who, far from separating God and man, unites them hypostatically, unconfusedly, and undividedly, is the best revelation of both man and God, the key for understanding the whole of Orthodox Christianity. The God-Man Christ completes man, reveals God, and is the fulfillment of history. This is why He constitutes the supreme and ultimate criterion of Orthodoxy.

The God-Man Christ is, first and foremost, the revelation of the true nature of man, because He is the most perfect Son of Man, the most sublime offspring of human nature, that Man Who emerges, is manifested in history, at the moment when human nature attains to its final destiny, of being united hypostatically with the Divine nature.

There have been many atheists through the centuries who maintain that man can become God independently of God. But heresy is never as bold as the truth. And no heretic has ever approached the boldness of the Orthodox Fathers, who, as interpreted by Cabasilas with matchless clarity in his homilies on the Mother of God, emphasize that, by the Grace of God, man is able not simply to become God, but actually to give birth to God within history. For Orthodoxy, the grandeur of human nature resides precisely in its capacity to become Theotokos. This grandeur is disclosed, safeguarded, and attested by the Only-Begotten Son of the Theotokos.



But the God-Man Christ also reveals the true nature of God, because He reveals God's love for man, and it is well known that the Holy Spirit confirms, through the Holy Evangelist John, that "God is love." We are talking, here, of a love that is not pity or charity, but true friendship, that is, deep respect and esteem, philanthropy. For God, although He is able to, does not Himself overcome death and the Devil by His own power, and does not bestow salvation on man by condescension, but becomes truly and really man in such a way that one man overcomes death, in order that all men might subsequently overcome it. God, as the man that He was, endures spitting and scourging so that man might be purified and shine in his primordial beauty. It is striking that, on Great Friday, Pilate, indicating the humiliated God, exclaims the revealing words: "Behold the Man."

Even beyond this, God condescends to our condition: He truly and really dies as the true man that He is, and, because He is God, resurrects. Thus, in Christ, man is resurrected. "Christ is risen from the dead,... and upon those in the tombs bestowing life."

Consequently, the purpose for which God dies becomes evident: the resurrection of man. It is precisely this purpose that the Lord wishes to make clear and confirm when, a few days before His death, He passes through Bethany and raises Lazarus. "In giving us an assurance of the general Resurrection before Thy Passion, O Christ God,

Thou didst raise Lazarus from the dead,” as the *Apolytikion* of the Feast emphasizes.

It now becomes clear that the Orthodox perspective in which we have endeavored to situate our topic leads us to the core of the problem, that is, the historical and real death of Jesus Christ. And, in arriving at the core, we also see the solution leaping out before us. For the very nature of things clearly presents us with the Gospel of the Resurrection of man as an Orthodox response to the proclamation of the death of God.

This point is one of the central issues of the joyful message of salvation. To be more precise, it is salvation itself.

‘For if the dead rise not,’ declares the Apostle Paul, ‘[our] faith is vain.... But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept.’

The Divine Chrysostomos summons mankind to keep festival.

Let no one lament over his sins and transgressions: ‘For forgiveness hath dawned forth from the Tomb. Let no one fear death, for the Death of the Savior hath set us free.’ Now ‘Christ is risen, and the demons are abased. Christ is risen, and the Angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life is set at liberty. Christ is risen, and none is left dead in the tomb.’

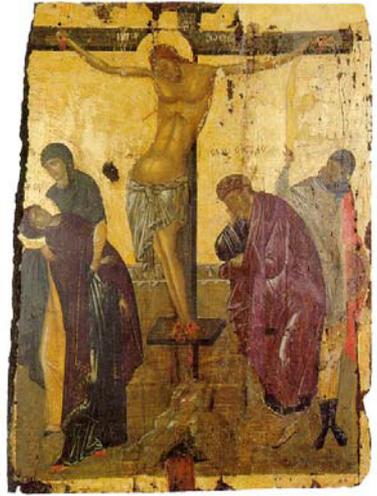
From this height of the true and real resurrection of man it becomes clear that the entire set of issues posed by philosophers and theologians who preach the “death of God” is of secondary importance. We have seen, in fact, that the representatives of this school are talking not about the historical death of God, but about the death of an idea about God. The death of God is, for them, a verbal artifice, which they use to cover up the stark reality that for them, as this cursory study of their texts has shown us, it is, in fact, the death of man.

However, the message preached by Orthodoxy—which is not an ideology or a philosophy, but actual history—, is the real and historical death of God. It is precisely this that brings about the real and historical resurrection of man.

Jesus, when He had cried...with a loud voice, yielded up the spirit. And, behold, the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the

graves after His Resurrection, and went into the Holy City, and appeared unto many.

Thus, it becomes clear that Orthodox theology can proclaim the death of God far more authentically than the atheists. On Great Friday, at the Epitaphios Service, the Orthodox faithful truly and genuinely celebrate this death. But the miracle of Great Friday is that the faithful, even as they attend God's funeral, celebrate the death of death and the resurrection of the dead.



Hades was wounded in the heart when it received Him Whose side was wounded by the spear; consumed by Divine Fire, it groaned aloud at the salvation of us who sing: O God our Redeemer, blessed art Thou.

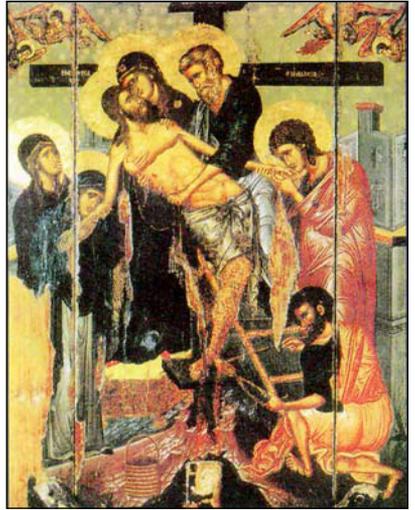
For, laid in the sepulchre, O Mighty One, with Thy life-giving hand Thou didst burst asunder the bars of death and to those from every age who slept in Hades didst proclaim true redemption, O Savior, Who art become the firstborn from the dead.

Christ, therefore, really died, but He died in order to encounter man right where he was, in distress and disheartenment, in foolishness and irrationality, and to resurrect him.

If He had not died, His Incarnation would not have been complete and would have been illusory. But He really did die, because He took our mortal condition seriously. Indeed, He became in all respects, save sin, what we are. Man forsook God, was derailed into emptiness, and engulfed in sin. God emptied Himself in the domain of sin, wore our sinful flesh without sin as His flesh and sanctified it. He poured Himself out like myrrh upon the mire of human stench and turned that stench into fragrance. He lived the simple daily life of mankind and gave it meaning, filling it with eternity. He performed manual work in order to reveal that the most monotonous daily task has an eternal purpose and substance. He suffered, was afflicted, and felt anguish, lest there remain any area or aspect of human life that He had not Himself experienced. And, in fulfillment of this participation in

the human condition, He reaches the point of accepting even death, since He wishes to be near us wherever we may be.

Thus, if we find ourselves in the depths of desolation, we should know that Christ is beside us, since He, too, experienced desolation. If we are in anguish, Christ, again, is at our side, since He, too, experienced anguish. If we are forlorn and lonely, we should know that no one was lonelier than He, Who felt on the Cross as if His own Father were abandoning Him.**



No matter how low we descend, how far we fall, Christ is beneath us, since He was in Hades. Even if we die, amid the chaos of death Christ is waiting for us.

For precisely this reason, the death of God is not the discouragement, but the consolation and the hope of the faithful.

Thy Cross, O Lord, is life and resurrection for Thy people.

And the proclamation of the death of God is thus shown to be the boast, the victory, and the glory not of unbelievers, but of the Church. The death of God is synonymous with the Resurrection of Christ. God died, but Christ arose. Early one Sunday in Jerusalem, in the reign of Pontius Pilate, Christ truly and really arose. This means that man truly and really arose, for the risen Christ crushed the bonds of corruption and freed man, who had imprisoned himself, deadened the sting of death, and granted man life. He demolished the “middle wall of partition,” “united things that were formerly divided,” brought life to death, eternity to time, Heaven to earth, and God to man: “all things have become mingled together.”

However, since this resurrection of man is a resurrection not only of his soul, but also of his body, there follows, as a natural consequence, the resurrection of the works of man, of culture, and also of creation, which is an extension of man’s body. After the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the whole of creation, and bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The limitations of place and time break down, a new liturgical time and a new liturgical space come into being, and the last times are inaugurated.



Now are all things filled with light, both heaven and earth, and the nether regions; let all creation therefore celebrate the Arising of Christ, whereby it is established.

Shine, shine, O New Jerusalem, for the glory of the Lord hath arisen upon thee; dance now and exult, O Sion; and do thou rejoice, O pure Theotokos, in the Arising of thy Son.

Clearly, then, the fact that God died signifies, for Orthodoxy, that man has resurrected and that everything that man creates, in the final analysis, has meaning and interest, that life becomes beautiful and immortal.

Great Friday
April 8/21, 2006



* Panagiotes Nellas, “Ο Θάνατος του Θεού και η Ανάσταση του Ανθρώπου” (The death of God and the resurrection of man), in *Σταυρός και Ανάσταση* (Cross and Resurrection), Vol. X in *Ὁρθόδοξη Μαρτυρία* (Athens: Ekdoseis “Akritis,” 1982), pp. 103-125.
• This essay first appeared in the form of a lecture on Pascha of 1972. It has been reprinted from the periodical *Κοινωνία* with slight corrections and certain additions.

** It should be noted, for the sake of dogmatic exactitude, that when Christ cried out “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (St. Matthew 27:46), as St. Gregory the Theologian explains, “[It] was not He that was forsaken either by the Father or by His own Divinity, as some opine, as if His Divinity were afraid of suffering and therefore withdrew itself from Him in His suffering (for who compelled Him either to be born on earth in the first place or to ascend the Cross?). But as I said, He was in

Himself representing our condition. For we were the ones previously forsaken and despised, but now assumed and saved by the sufferings of Him Who is impassible” (“Oration XXX [Fourth Theological Oration],” §5, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXVI, col. 109AB)—*Trans.*