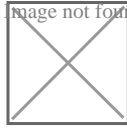


## Shockingly in Paradise (Chrysostomos Stamoulis)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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**It's true that within the realm of Christianity, there's often more talk of sin than there is of virtue. This is, in essence, a path of deprivation, the aim of which is not so much the quest for the good but much more the avoidance of the bad.**



There's no doubt that such a position imbues sin with dimensions greater than those it actually has; produces guilt complexes; and projects God's world in Manichaeian terms, where the forces of good struggle against those of evil. And all of this within a culture which seeks, frenziedly promotes and sometimes actually creates delinquent patterns of behaviour, marginalizing the search for the good, which it understands as being reserved exclusively for special occasions. Come what may, Christmas and Easter arrive once a year, bringing with them the traditional whimsy of the positive side of life, its humanitarianism. In this way, the culture of delinquency, offering doses of virtual emotion, rather like a musical interlude, is furnished with an alibi so that, fully justified and unimpeded, it can

continue along the chosen path of its existence.

And if all this is the present state of contemporary culture, to which the Christian churches of the world belong and within which they function- though this does not mean that they were created by it-, nevertheless, the path of sin in the East and West has its own history.

It must be pointed out from the very beginning that the theology of the seven deadly sins is not born of the Bible. What John has to say in his 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle concerning “sin unto death” (5, 16-17), which has often been quoted in support of the so-called deadly sins, doesn’t refer to any particular sin, but, as can be readily understood from the context, to the rejection of the incarnation. According to the New Testament, the only sin which leads to death, then, is the rejection of the incarnation of the Divine Word and, as a result, the denial of the Resurrection.

### **God as Vengeance**

The prime locus for the genesis of the theory of the seven deadly sins is Western Christendom, with Pope Gregory the Great, also known as the Dialogist, as its proponent, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This was the Pope who placed “cleansing fire” at the centre of his teaching, thus ushering in the “dark Middle Ages with the menace of hell”, which was based on a legal and intensely moralistic understanding of the relationship between God and humankind. It’s a relationship founded on the pattern of “crime and punishment”. Sin is our crime, which offends divine justice, and it is overcome through the application of punishment.

Precursors of the doctrine of the seven deadly sins, that is the first attempt to number the sins (with all that this involves), were the catalogues drawn up in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Evagrios Pontikos and, a little later, by John Cassian. Evagrios, in fact, lists eight grievous sins, eight evil thoughts: greed, licentiousness, love of money, sorrow, anger, sloth, vainglory and pride. In time, with the conflation of vainglory and pride, as he himself claims, these became the seven deadly sins.

Of course, it must be stressed that Evagrios wasn’t talking about deadly sins, but about evil thoughts which wound monks in their battle with the demons. These can be countered by the cultivation of the eight appropriate medicines, one for each thought, which bring the monk to a passionless state and, in the end, to the love they so much desire.

All of which is to say that the theory of the seven deadly sins is not entirely arbitrary, but rather an interpretational approach to the catalogues mentioned above and to the Jewish “Decalogue”, as well as to the theological distinction

between “grievous” and “minor” sins. This was a distinction which obtained in the Church almost from its foundation and was linked, as is well-known, both to confession and repentance, as well as to the remission of sins, which differed according to the case.

In this way, grievous sins, such as, for example, murder and promiscuity, which were never numbered, sometimes led to total exclusion of the believer from the Church and, therefore from public confession. (We might recall here the exuberant tendencies of the era, when people believed that Christ’s Second Coming was imminent or had already taken place, in which case the Church had no authority to judge grievous sins, because God would soon decide for Himself). At other times, in special cases, they were forgiven by the apostles and the believer was again accepted in the Church.

For the first time, we have the institutional abandonment of the position that grievous sins can be forgiven only after the Second Coming with Canon 22 of the Synod of Ankara, in 314. There it’s stressed with some emphasis that those who deliberately commit murder are to be subject to penance and may receive the Holy Gifts on their death-bed, at the end of their life, and not at the Final Judgment.

### **God as Mercy**

If, in the West, the catalogues of sins, and the differentiation into grievous and minor ones, was interpreted through its institutional and juridical context, which placed fear of God the Judge at the centre of the lives of Christians and which engendered guilt complexes, in the East the interpretation was different.

With their basic criterion the fact of subjectivity, that is the promotion of the human person, which is not restricted to sealed systems of any faceless objectivity, to impersonal laws and rules that ignore the mystery of being different, the Fathers of the East steadfastly refused make the distinction between deadly and non-deadly sins and so rejected any enumeration of them.

So the only sin unto death remained unrepentance, that is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, for which, even if a saint prays that the perpetrator may be excused, he or she won’t be heard. Or to put it better, in the words of Saint Symeon the New Theologian, the wound which leads to death is every sin that’s not repented, not redeemed, never mind any distinction between grievous and minor, deadly or otherwise, important or insignificant. It’s clear, in such a perspective of understanding Church life, that, at the centre of the theology of the East, at the limits of an extremely creative culture, there is the human person, sick and most

certainly not a criminal, who is seeking the restoration of his or her health- and definitely not punishment- from the merciful God of love.

It's particularly interesting that, in the East, even where there was some sort of effort to enumerate the sins, as an exception to the rule, there was never any mention of deadly sins, simply of passions and evil thoughts. Typical of this is the case of Saint John of the Ladder, who, in the belief that he was following Saint Gregory the Theologian (whereas, in fact, he was confusing him with Pope Gregory), embraced the number seven, which he considered more appropriate than eight. He writes: "Some people, when they talk of the passions and evil thoughts, are in the habit of placing vainglory in a different class, separate from pride. This is why they say there are eight outstanding and dominant evil thoughts. Gregory the Theologian, on the other hand, and other teachers counted them as seven. I, too, am more convinced by them. Because who could have pride if they've conquered vainglory?".

### **Means of Duress**

It's clear from what's been said so far that, although the ancient tradition of Christianity was common to the East and the West, the interpretive approach differs considerably. It would be no exaggeration to say that the reason for this difference has to do with the positions on which each Church interprets the common truths of the past. So cultural, political, social and economic conditions are what create the locus, the mould, within which theology develops and which affect its course. In other words, theology develops within space and time, within history, which it influences and by which it's influenced.

It can be readily understood, then, that the legal and extremely moral understanding of salvation in the West, which had as its focus the juridical and formal regulation of people's behaviour, could not help but transform the anxious efforts made by the ancient Church to set pastoral limits into a means of duress, a way of controlling the freedom of conscience of the members of the Church community. This was in contrast to the East, where the therapeutic nature of salvation in Christ was the dominant theme, though even here the Scholastic influence of the West was occasionally to be found. But the enumeration of the sins was not transformed automatically into deadly and non-deadly, venial and unpardonable, because, as Saint Maximos the Confessor puts it: "Sickness is neither forgivable nor punishable".

### **A Church for People**

So, if, in one instance, the God of righteousness is manifested through His

representatives as the absolute guarantor of order and legality, the God of love and mercy, on the other, seeks, according to Elder Païsius, the right moment to effect, in a scandalous manner, the salvation of people who are struggling to do their best. The Elder writes and uncovers, in a simple and therefore revelatory manner, the culture of the incarnation of a Gospel Church, a Church of love and peace, a Church made for people: "If people do their best and aren't moved towards misdemeanours, but in the course of the struggle win some and lose some, win and lose, God won't abandon them. If they just want a little bit not to sadden God, they'll get the Paradise "in their walking shoes". God, Who's good by nature, will get them in to Paradise shockingly. He'll see to it that He'll take them at a time when they're repentant. They may have struggled all their lives, but God won't abandon them,; He'll take them when it's best for them. God is good; He wants everyone to be saved. If it were only a few who would be saved, then why was Christ crucified? The gates to Paradise aren't narrow. There's room for all people who bend down in humility and aren't puffed up with pride, provided they repent, that is lay the burden of their sins on Christ. Then they'll have plenty of room to pass through the gates easily".