

The Outwardly Pious (Kostas E. Tsiropoulos)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Religion is a response to a deep longing of ours: the yearning for immortality. It's a raft which supports us in our fear, enables us to pass through the dread rapids of chaos and to reach the harbour of faith and hope. It redeems us from the absurd, reveals the furthest depths of the truth- the purpose of our presence on earth and the reality that follows our death- and fills the soul to overflowing with zeal for sanctity.

I should make it clear that, in talking about religion, I essentially have in mind Christianity, the religion which wasn't constructed, as a result of our metaphysical awe, but was revealed by God Himself and is unceasingly revealed to the faithful through the Church.



While religion- the Christian religion- is the holy of holies in life, it has suffered for centuries, and is suffering greatly in our own day and age, from a large group of people who, though they seem to be genuinely pious and devoted to it, in fact are not. It would be easy to suppose that these people are hypocrites, but that isn't the case. Hypocrisy has an element of awareness in it, of the will of the person pretending. Hypocrites know that they're hypocrites and their conscience agrees and consents to this fraud. They use religion for their own ends, for social advancement, economic benefits and so on. The sanctimonious, on the other hand, aren't really aware of their condition. They think, or rather believe, that they're genuinely pious. No shadow of doubt or hesitation crosses their mind. They think that they express the unadulterated spirit of religion and something even more: that they've been singled out to protect it and to rid the temple of the various money-changers and merchants attending it at any given time. The self-righteous live superficially and experience a flawed version of Christianity which, since it has no depth and no spiritual substance, can easily turn into religious fanaticism, the most destructive, harshest and most impious fanaticism against God and other people.

I can't imagine people who are genuinely pious also being fanatics. Firm in their principles and convictions, yes, but not fanatics. Because fanaticism's a breach of the freedom both of the fanatics themselves and of those at whom it's directed. It's a darkening of the conscience, which can't be nourished or reined in except by freedom. By its nature, fanaticism has an element of intense or persistent hostility and has all the poison of bigotry. Those who are genuinely pious aren't hostile and

bigoted because they live and are nourished and enlightened spiritually and consciously by the dogma of dogmas, which is love, that is, the essence of God, since 'God is love'.

The outwardly pious observe the dogmas strictly, but for them, these dogmas are dry and formalized, since they aren't brought to life by the grace of the presence of God, Who is love. Dogmas for them are formulations not substance; words not passion, hollow pronouncements not trembling experiences of the soul. In the name of dogma, they're prepared to persecute, to slander, to eliminate others, unaware that God is no longer with them, since they've ceased to feel love and sympathy.

These sanctimonious people, with their erratic and, in Christian terms, blasphemous behaviour tend to push people away from the Church, to cast a chill over the enthusiasm and faith of many people and often to defame God, whose name is Love. They believe that they're in good standing with God and enjoy the certainty and sickening brashness of their 'virtue'. They assure themselves that they'll leave the world justified and, without question, will gain the heavenly kingdom... And so they believe that they're obliged to 'struggle with', to admonish, to berate, sinners, to threaten them with hell and moral extirpation. They forget that the genuinely pious are forever hesitant, forever monitoring their own attitude in order to see whether they're within the realm of love, within the sphere of God. 'If you think you're standing, take care not to fall' [I Cor. 10, 12].

The self-righteous have an air about them and a certainty that's truly inhuman. Scowling and overbearing, they make those whom they come across disgusted, not only at them, but, unfortunately, at the genuinely honourable and holy positions they hold. They give Christianity a bad name and distort the faith through force and harshness. They think up unbearable burdens and set them on other people's shoulders with wicked pleasure and malice which, once beheld is difficult to forget. They forget that the Judgment will be held on the basis of love and, in particular, on love towards others, among whom God Himself resides and awaits. They've gradually gone so far astray that they've lost the sense and measure of being human. They've forgotten that this wonderful creation of God's has a heart and that our immortal and troubled soul dwells in a body that's sensitive and weak. Like the Pharisees, they lay burden upon burden until those who've been deceived, those who pay attention to them, see, with despair, that it's impossible to practice Christianity in our own day and age and are so disappointed that they abandon it.

In the Gospels and in first centuries of its life, Christianity was simple, accepting,

unassuming and loving. These days it's close to being a puzzling spiritual state that's been exhaustively 'processed' and analysed by the egotism of the human mind. With their way of life, the outwardly pious strip religion of the mystery which gives it life and transform it by misrepresenting it as social expediency. They go to church and nothing within them trembles at the thought that they might be unworthy. They have the certainty and self-sufficiency of the unhinged who, essentially, respect nothing and don't treat others, any other person at all, with respect and understanding. Why would they show respect, though? They've made genuine piety an issue of their own self-esteem. They're always condemning other people because they don't know the sweet, human feeling in the soul which we call compassion. If they could, for example, annihilate their opponents without it coming to light, they'd do so without hesitation and 'in the name of God'. God is love, but their hearts have been eaten away by animus and hate.

Fortunately, we have the Lives of the Saints. There we see that the really pious, the really holy people were unassuming, well-disposed, understanding and not fanatical. They had no prejudices and were serene. They were like the flowers that grow on a garden fence, fragrant with virtue but bashful. These saints, who emerged from the dimension of humanity, from sins and errors washed away with tears and humility, give us back the pure taste of religion and embrace its sole criterion: love.

Compared to their example, the flummery of the sanctimonious is obvious. Their fall from the realm of humanity and of God's grace is apparent. They terrorize and scare the feeble-minded and peddle Christianity in order to satisfy their ego and their complexes. They don't know what 'heart' means, nor 'sympathy', nor 'meekness'. They believe that God's honour lies in their unscrupulous hands, because, in essence, they don't believe that the Holy Spirit is alert and is guiding God's Church. They relentlessly murder souls and work together with the spiritually difficult, materialistic and blasphemous times in which we live to de-Christianize people, so that our faith will become an increasingly remote thing of the past.

Source agiazoni.gr

This is a fiery text, but it was written at a time, 1966, when there was a great deal to be fiery about in Greece. Religious life was dominated by the Puritanical, anti-monastic brotherhoods of Zoï and Sotir and being a Christian was a grim business. A year later there was a military coup, the motto of which was 'Greece of Greek Christians' a laudable sentiment, but not when imposed at the point of a gun. Alas, the official Church gave sometimes tacit sometimes active support to the junta with results predicted by the author of this article: people left the Church in droves,

some never to return.

Yet all was not lost. The fall of the junta, in 1974 coincided with the beginning of the revival of monasticism, an astounding renaissance given that the military government had been talking about the possibility of developing the almost empty Holy Mountain as a tourist attraction, with the monasteries as hotels.

It is also true, of course, that, by God's grace, even during the worst years, there were people in the Church who were true to the faith. How many of the 'metropolitans' (we don't really do 'bishops' much in Greece) are now remembered, whereas 'insignificant' monks such as Elders Païsius, Porfyrios, Iakovos and Amfilohios have all recently been canonized?

How typical of the workings of God that the self-appointed 'guardians of the faith', in all places and at all times, end up driving people away from the Church and that the latter are drawn back by the Holy Spirit working through humble, often ill-educated, and seemingly unimportant people. WJL.