

## **DANGERS OF TRAVELING (TOO FAR) WITH ROMANIDES**

by Thomas Deretich, March 25 / April 7, 2014, Annunciation

Some personal observations on the relevance (or non-relevance) of Father John Romanides for controversies over apophatic and cataphatic theology, created words, and human beings' knowledge of divine revelation.

Father John Romanides is not an Orthodox “authority.” He is certainly not an Orthodox authority on apophatic theology, or on divine revelation, or on the name of God. He was a man with scholarly ability. When he accurately summarized the teachings of the Orthodox saints, he could be a very good instructor, both orally and in his writings. He has had good influence on many people in many ways. But when he summarized the teachings of the saints in a one-sided manner, he fell into delusion. When he directly opposed the teaching of the Church, he became a defender of heresy.

I only met Father John Romanides one time, but it was a one-on-one theological conversation in great detail. He clearly went against the teaching of the Orthodox Church. His exact words were “Severus was Orthodox.” He was referring to the Severus who was the Patriarch of Antioch and a fanatical opponent of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, held at Chalcedon in 451. Severus became the intellectual leader of the Monophysite heresy in its opposition to the Orthodox Church. The *Synodicon of Orthodoxy* calls Severus “Godless” and anathematizes him along with the other advocates of the Monophysite and Monothelite heresies. But Father John Romanides defied this teaching of the Orthodox Church and sided with the Monophysites on the “Orthodoxy” of Severus. “Severus was Orthodox,” Father John defiantly asserted. Father John also took the Monophysite position—and opposed the Orthodox position—on Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Although some of Theodoret’s writings (early writings against Saint Cyril of Alexandria) were condemned by the Orthodox Church, the Church has never proclaimed the Monophysite view that Theodoret was a “pure Nestorian.” Theodoret is called “Blessed,” by many Orthodox. At a minimum, the Orthodox Church does not

consider Theodoret to be a pure Nestorian, as the Monophysites consider him. But Father John adopted part of the Monophysite view on Severus and Theodoret. Father John took a position that is directly opposite to that taken by the later Ecumenical Councils, the *Synodicon of Orthodoxy*, and the mind of the Orthodox Church. Father John Romanides's un-Orthodox deception on this point may have been partly a result of his deep involvement with ecumenical dialogue with the Monophysites, where he caved in, in part, to the "moderate" Monophysite positions. His ecumenical work in this area attained significant results when the New Calendar ("Greek Orthodox") Patriarchate of Antioch entered into communion with the Monophysite Jacobite ("Syriac Orthodox") patriarchate of Antioch. Father John Romanides's defiance and betrayal of Orthodox doctrine helped grease the wheels for the fall of Antioch from Orthodoxy into a relativist pro-Monophysitism. (Father John did write insightfully in pointing out that Theodore of Mopsuestia was similar to Nestorius in their mutual errors.)

In his teachings on apophaticism, divine revelation, and created words, Father John has another tendency, seemingly almost the opposite, seemingly almost Nestorian. Father John emphasized apophatic theology so much and so one-sidedly—and he downplayed cataphatic theology so much—that he found himself on dangerous ground, in which he seemed to be downplaying the divine revelation that is conveyed in the Holy Scriptures and the dogmas of the Church.

A bigger problem is that individuals can take ideas and quotations from Father John about God being "unknowable" and push them to an extreme that Father John, with his greater patristic leaning than many of his followers, did not intend. I long wondered how Christos Yannaras, with his ecumenist and relativist tendencies, could put Father John Romanides (a patristic scholar) in the same category as Nikos Nissiotis, who was an ultra-ecumenist with very strong relativist tendencies. The answer is that both Romanides and Nissiotis emphasized apophatic (negative) theology so much that they paved the way for more explicit forms of relativism, ecumenism, postmodernism, and agnosticism on the dogmas of the Church that are based on divine revelation. Romanides helped contribute

somewhat to the idea—prevalent among some modern Greek theologians, even some considered “traditional”—that dogmas are a “necessary evil.” If we call the divine dogmas of the faith “evil,” then ecumenism—whether new calendar ecumenism or “old calendar ecumenism” seems natural. If dogma is evil, if dogmas are mere words, then doctrinal relativism seems good, to some of these people.

When Romanides had his famous debates with Panagiotes Trempeles in 1957, Romanides opposed the Augustinianism and rationalism of Trempeles. Trempeles opposed what he considered to be a one-sided emphasis on apophaticism (even anti-rationalism) that could lead to agnosticism. Both of these distinguished scholars were correct in their criticisms of the other. Trempeles and colleagues were overly influenced by rationalism and Augustinianism. But Romanides and especially some of his more extreme followers were paving the way for a disregard for the divine dogmas of the faith that have been formulated by the Church in human language. Romanides directly opposed the mind of the Church on who is Orthodox, who is Monophysite, and who is Nestorian. His extremist followers in Greece directly oppose Orthodox teaching on many issues, especially those relating to ecclesiology and ecumenism.

I do not know of any Orthodox Christians who are denying that God is above created names and concepts. God is above our words and our understandings. But the saints of the Church taught a balance of negative and positive theology, negation and affirmation, apophatic and cataphatic. God is unknown, but He is known by the faithful, who can become “communicants of the divine nature.” God is invisible, but He is visible in His uncreated glory and in the human nature of the God-Man. God is beyond names, but He is named by many names. God is above creation, but He fills all of creation. The holy (created) things of God are not God Himself, but God dwells in holy (created) things.

If a person were to emphasize—in a one-sided or extreme way—only God’s transcendence, God’s mystery, and our lack of knowledge about God, then that

person is in danger of discounting God's revelation to us creatures, His presence, and His "dwelling in" holy persons, holy things, and holy words.

This is what Saint John of Damascus says about negative and affirmative theology:

"These, then, are the affirmations and the negations [that is, the cataphatic and the apophatic], but the sweetest names are a combination of both: for example, the super-essential Essence, the Godhead that is more than God [that is, God is above our knowledge about Him], the Beginning that is above beginning, and such like."

In the Orthodox saints there is a *balance*, but in the modernist and postmodernist advocates of one-sided apophaticism, there is *imbalance*.

Does God "dwell in" the created words of Holy Scripture? Some modern people have difficulty with this teaching of the Church. Their difficulty is certainly consistent with modern and postmodern views that deprecate the divine revelation within Holy Scripture.

Here is what Saint Gregory Palamas writes in his *Confession of the Orthodox Faith*, which was endorsed by the Council of Constantinople of 1351 (the "Ninth Ecumenical Council") and which is attached to the dogmatic decree, the *Synodal Tome*, of this council:

**"we worship relatively [proskynoûmen schetikôs]** the holy icon of the Son of God Who has been depicted as made man for our sake, offering up the worship relatively to the prototype; and the honored wood of the Cross, and all the symbols of His sufferings, as being divine trophies of victory over the common enemy of our race; and the saving figure of the honored Cross,

the divine temples and places and the sacred vessels and the **God-given oracles [words, sayings, Scriptures, *theoparádota lógia*]**, because of the God Who **dwells [*enoikóũnta*]** in them. In the same manner, we worship also the icons of all the saints, because of our love for them and the God Whom these [saints] truly loved and served, in this worship of the icons we carry our thoughts to the forms [the persons depicted] on the icons. We venerate also the very tombs of the saints, because the sanctifying grace [of God] did not depart from the most sacred bones [of the saints], just as death did not separate Godhood [*theótēs*] from the Master's body during the three days' death" (translated from Saint Gregory Palamas, *Ὁμολογία τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου πίστεως* [Confession of the Orthodox Faith], 4, in Karmires, *Δογματικά καὶ Συμβολικά Μνημεία* [1st ed.], 1:344, <http://www.symbole.gr/chrtoms/dogma/1171-fides19>; see also [http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/gr\\_main/catehism/theologia\\_zoi/themata.asp?cat=patr&contents=contents\\_Pat\\_Grigoriou\\_3.asp&main=kat021&file=grig\\_3.9.htm](http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/gr_main/catehism/theologia_zoi/themata.asp?cat=patr&contents=contents_Pat_Grigoriou_3.asp&main=kat021&file=grig_3.9.htm); see also the English translation in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith* 1:337).

«**προσκυνοῦμεν σχετικῶς** τὴν ἁγίαν εἰκόνα τοῦ περιγραφέντος, ὡς δι' ἡμᾶς ἐνανθρωπήσαντος, υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, πρὸς τὸ πρωτότυπον ἀναφέροντες εὐσεβῶς τὴν προσκύνησιν, καὶ τὸ τίμιον τοῦ σταυροῦ ξύλον καὶ τὰ σύμβολα πάντα τῶν αὐτοῦ παθημάτων ὡς ὄντα τρόπαια θεῖα κατὰ τοῦ κοινοῦ πολεμίου τοῦ γένους ἡμῶν· πρὸς δὲ καὶ τὸν τύπον τοῦ τιμίου σταυροῦ ὡς ὄπλον σωτήριον, καὶ τοὺς θείους ναοὺς καὶ τόπους καὶ τὰ ἱερὰ σκεύη καὶ **θεοπαράδοτα λόγια**, διὰ τὸν αὐτοῖς **ἐνοικοῦντα** θεόν. ὡσαύτως προσκυνοῦμεν καὶ τὰς τῶν ἁγίων πάντων εἰκόνας, διὰ τὴν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἀγάπην καὶ τὸν θεὸν ὃν οὗτοι ἀληθῶς ἠγάπησάν τε καὶ ἐθεράπευσαν, ἐν τῇ

προσκυνήσει πρὸς τὰς ἐκείνων μορφὰς ἀναφέροντες τὴν διάνοιαν. προσκυνοῦμεν καὶ αὐτὰς τὰς τῶν ἁγίων σορούς, ὡς τῆς ἁγιαστικῆς χάριτος τῶν αὐτῶν οὐκ ἀποπτώσεως ἱερωτάτων ὁστῶν, ὡς περ οὐδὲ τοῦ δεσποτικοῦ σώματος ἐν τῷ τριημέρῳ ἡ θεότης διηρέθη θανάτῳ» (Ἅγιος Γρηγόριος ὁ Παλαμᾶς, *Ὁμολογία τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Πίστεως* 4· Καρμύρης, *Δογματικὰ καὶ Συμβολικὰ Μνημεία* [1η ἔκδ.], 1:344, <http://www.symbole.gr/chrtoms/dogma/1171-fides19>; see also [http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/gr\\_main/catehism/theologia\\_zoi/themata.asp?cat=patr&contents=contents\\_Pat\\_Grigoriou\\_3.asp&main=kat021&file=grig\\_3.9.htm](http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/gr_main/catehism/theologia_zoi/themata.asp?cat=patr&contents=contents_Pat_Grigoriou_3.asp&main=kat021&file=grig_3.9.htm)).

In contradiction to this *Confession of the Orthodox Faith*, some modern people seem to have difficulty accepting the Orthodox dogma that God “dwells in” holy persons, holy things, and holy words.

Walking along the path of one-sided apophaticism, along with Father John Romanides, and even possibly surpassing him along that road, is not the balanced teaching of the Orthodox Church.

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Father Theodore Stylianopoulos, who was a student of Father John Romanides, and remained overly sympathetic to his views, nonetheless, wrote some appropriate cautions:

“one must still take account of the biblical and patristic view that there are in Scripture clear and abiding teachings about God and his ways accessible to all. One does not necessarily have to adopt platonist metaphysics about immutable truth to affirm that the Bible, at the communication level of words and

images, contains abiding insights, principles, and truths concerning such things as God and idols, grace and free will, love and hate, honesty and lying, forgiveness and retaliation, justice and exploitation, giving and selfishness, hope and despair.

[...]

“One does not have to read very far in the theological and practical writings of the Church fathers, such as Basil and Chrysostom, to see the massive authority they attached to the letter and plain meaning of Scripture as secure instruction about God and his will for all. These fathers relied heavily on the clarity and stability of meaning resident in the biblical text they derived by grammatical exegesis and assumed that any reader could follow without esoteric techniques. To claim that ‘the Bible is not inspired’ as it stands is to fly into the face of the whole patristic tradition and undercut Scripture’s plain witness to God’s dealing with all people. To seem to claim that stable and secure meaning at the level of words and images cannot at all be gained by ordinary human understanding is to undercut at once human communication, scholarship, as well as the hope of meaningful dialogue and possible reconciliation between disputants, whether orthodox or heretical. We are not saying that the plain meaning of word and images available to all is everything but that it is an integral part of that same truth about God and of God, which all are invited to seek.” (Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*, vol. 1: *Scripture, Tradition, and Hermeneutics*, quoted at <http://ishmaelite.blogspot.com/2010/06/romanides-sympathetic-but-critical.html>)

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## EXCERPTS FROM FATHER JOHN ROMANIDES THAT ARE MISUSED TO SUPPORT AN APPROACH THAT DEPRECATES AFFIRMATIVE THEOLOGY

For this reason the Fathers of the Church do not accept metaphysics, because metaphysics is human reflection on the subject of ‘the immutable’. By means of concepts and words, man thinks about and expresses ‘the immutable’. This is the foundation of metaphysics. In patristic theology, however, we have the famous saying of Gregory the Theologian, the compass for every Orthodox theologian, which tells us, ‘It is impossible to express God and even more impossible to conceive Him.’ We can neither describe God in words nor understand Him. (Empirical Dogmatics, Father John Romanides, Vol 1, pg 228)

For this reason the Fathers say that anyone who identifies concepts, texts or created meanings with uncreated things is an idolater. It is idolatry to identify God with some idea that we have about God within ourselves. We think that our idea about God is God. When we identify our idea with God, idolatry begins. This is an idol.

The holy Fathers believed that there was no similarity between uncreated and created things, and consequently there was no similarity between ineffable-uncreated words and created words and concepts. This is why they did not accept metaphysics. Even when God is described, He is indescribable.

Only someone who is in the state of purification and illumination perceives the meaning of created words. By



contrast, ‘The concepts and words used for God by someone who is not in the state of purification and illumination are clearly idolatrous and do not correspond to reality. The words of Holy Scripture, the texts and concepts used in Holy Scripture, are not aimed at conveying concepts and words identical to the reality called God. The aim of the concepts and words of Holy Scripture is to lead man to purification, illumination and glorification, as the ascetic Fathers, in particular, teach, in order that he may acquire knowledge, prophecy. As the Apostle Paul says, then everything is abolished and the only thing that remains is love, which is freedom. (Empirical Dogmatics, Father John Romanides, Vol 1, pg 259)

Created words are used in the first stages of perfection, but they are not absolute, in the sense that created words are used so that someone can be cured by means of these created words, under the guidance of a spiritual father, by Holy Scripture, by the writings of the Fathers of the Church and by the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. Once he reaches the stage of glorification, however, this experience of glorification goes beyond words and concepts, because he arrives at ineffable words....Only the energy can be shared, and this energy of God transcends concepts and words. There are no concepts and words about the energies of God. We do not use these words and concepts to understand God, but to be united with God. The fact that created words and concepts are transcended does not mean that they are abolished or abandoned by Orthodox Christians, as they are the path to being cured and glorification. They are divinely inspired words and concepts, which confirm the experience of glorification. (Empirical Dogmatics, Father John Romanides, Vol 1, pg 262)