

HERETICS!

*O Savior, who has torn Your garment?
Who has challenged the unity of the triune Godhead?
It is Arius, for he denied that You are equal to the Father.
Those who follow him do not believe that God took flesh for our sake,
but the Fathers of the Council proclaimed You as Son of God,
co-enthroned with the Father and the Holy Spirit.*

*Arius fell into the abyss of sin,
pretending blindness that he might not see the Light.
By his purpose he became the image of Judas.
But the Council at Nicea proclaimed You as Son of God,
co-enthroned with the Father and the Holy Spirit.*

(Stikhera on "Lord I Call" the 7th Sunday after Pascha—the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea)

Heretic!—the very word makes us think of the fires of the Spanish Inquisition—of everything dark and backward in human thought—of the very worst in religion.

Referring to someone as a heretic will seem a monstrous offense against freedom of thought to most educated people at the beginning of the third millennium. The term belongs in our past, a remnant of the Dark Ages of religious intolerance and scientific ignorance.

And yet, for Orthodox believers, there is indeed such a thing as heresy and heretics. We remember the worst of them by name and we excoriate their memory in the services of our Church— and on more than one occasion—during the course of our liturgical year.

Are we behind the times, as our critics would contend—still lost in the forest of ignorance and superstition that was the hallmark of the blighted past? Or, are there indeed some things so terrible and offensive against the nature of truth itself that they must be condemned as heresy (and their proponents as heretics)?

The answer to those questions is, no we are not behind the times. We are not victims or perpetrators of superstition and ignorance. And, yes, there are some teachings and teachers who, in their attacks on the fundamental teachings of the Church, deserve condemnation as heresy and heretics.

It is necessary, however, to clarify what we mean.

First, heresy comes from the Greek and, on the simplest level, means teachings that are 'other' than the Church's (and therefore, untrue) and heretics are those who, acting as if they were members of the Church, attempt to subvert her. In other words, heretics are the proverbial 'wolves in sheep's clothing'. Arius was a heretic because, as a priest of the Church, he attempted to introduce a strange

and destructive doctrine as the truth. He denied the divinity of Christ and therefore denied His power to save (since God alone can forgive sin and save sinners). He would have made Christ a liar and the gospel void. And he persisted in his false teaching even when he was called to repent of it.

Buddha is not a heretic, even though his teachings are often very different from the Church's. Why? Because he was never a member of the Church and did not attempt to overthrow its teachings. But to hold to those teachings of his that are contrary to the Church's (and especially to try to teach them to others) would make someone who claims to be an Orthodox Christian a heretic for the simple reason that he or she would be subverting the Church from within.

These are important distinctions. ***Heresy is the teaching of false doctrines by one who still claims to be a member of the Church.*** It is expected that those outside the Church will be teaching some falsehoods. The status of those who teach falsehood outside the Church is different from those who do so within it.

The very idea that there is such a thing as heresy and that there are real people who are heretics makes explicit the idea that there is such a thing as Truth (with a capital "T") and that there are real people who are teachers of Truth (the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea being among them).

To be Orthodox ('right-believing', 'right worshipping') means to be a holder of the Truth.

Pontius Pilate's question to Jesus on the day of His crucifixion—"What is truth?" (John 18:38)—has a concrete and verifiable answer. It was standing right in front of Him in the person of Jesus Christ, the only and eternally begotten Son of the Father, God incarnate, the Savior of the World.

Arius, in denying the divinity and eternity of Christ, was denying the Truth—willfully and purposefully. He was a heretic and his teachings, heresy. And there were others who would follow him in teaching variations on this same theme—the denial that the infinite, eternal, and almighty God could unite Himself to finite, mortal, and weak human flesh.

In the end, every heresy comes down to denying the incomprehensible mystery of the incarnation—of God with us as one of us (and yet remaining God).

In the end, every heresy is about intellectual arrogance and spiritual pride—the very source of the cosmic tragedy that was the Fall and the mother of every horror that has come about since.

Heresy matters. Lies about God, about His intended purpose, about what He has done for us, have immense consequences for us all. The terrible plagues that we have brought down upon ourselves throughout history are witness to this. The murderous perversion of religion, the worship of political ideas and leaders, the intellectual and spiritual void of secular humanism and pseudo-scientific atheism of our own times are all the results of heresy—the assault on God's Truth.

Lies about God and God's Truth destroy lives—spiritually, emotionally, and physically. And silence in the face of lies makes one a co-conspirator with the Father of Lies, the devil, who is the source of every heresy.

This is very strong language and sounds very strange in a culture that is willing to tolerate every contradiction as a manifestation of 'truth'. "Your truth may not be my truth, but both are equally valid", sums up the attitude of so many modern Americans—including an unfortunate number of people who claim to be faithful Orthodox.

Such an attitude is as silly and duplicitous as stating "1+1=2 for me, but it is OK if 1+1=5 for you." We tolerate—even advocate—spiritual contradictions, whereas we would never tolerate mathematical and scientific contradictions.

Why is this? Because we don't really believe that there is constant spiritual and theological Truth, whereas everyone believes in the rules (or truth) of addition.

In this we are worse off than the heretics! Arius knew that he was contradicting the teaching that Jesus was God incarnate. He never said that the opposite might also be true. It was one thing or the other, but not both. In this he was at least consistent. He believed that Truth existed, he was simply wrong in what he thought to be true!

What Arius, in his consistency, and modern people in their inconsistencies about Truth and the True God have in common is their **blindness**. Both "pretend blindness that (they) may not see the light".

Arius knew that his teaching would effectively make Jesus (who said, "I and the Father are one", and "Before Abraham was I AM") a liar and deprive humankind of any hope of salvation. Modern 'relativists' know that in saying **every** spiritual and theological opinion is equally true they are declaring that **none** of them is true. Only through willful self-deception and intentional blindness can one be either an Arius or a relativist (or a purveyor of any of a host of other falsehoods).

Heresy matters. Lies have force. And the world pays a terrible price in listening to them.

One who tells lies about God and His Truth—and Christ is the Truth of God, the one who declared, "I AM the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6)—is a betrayer, a Judas, who would crucify Truth for the sake of his or her own philosophy, ideology, social or scientific theory.

This is, indeed, very powerful language to be using in today's spiritually vapid and intellectually impoverished world, but strong language is appropriate in times of great danger. To vacillate is to become, even if unintentionally, an ally of the lie.

The Church condemned Arius and Arianism in the strongest possible language and terms. She would do so again when confronted by the persistent assaults of other heretics and heresies

because what was at stake were not ideas about vague and debatable philosophical precepts but the reality of God, the meaning and purpose of His creation, and the soul of every human being.

Lies matter because Truth matters. Truth matters even more in theology and spirituality than it does in mathematics and scientific inquiry. One can be intentionally stupid when it comes to solving long division, one can be willfully evasive when it comes to physics and the universe will go on proving how foolish it is to be so. But the intentional distortion of the Truth of God can—and has—led whole nations to destruction!

God's self-revelation to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is Truth; it is even more true than $1+1=2$, or, $e = mc^2$. All other 'truths' must relate to the Truth of God—either because they reveal Him in and through His material creation or because they lead us into communion with Him spiritually. Anything and anyone who leads in the wrong direction—away from God's self revelation—is an agent of the lie and thus, a betrayer of the Truth.

At this point the enemies of the Church will begin to crow that the next step is to call for the persecution, torture, and burning of our opponents. In fact, this has almost never been the Orthodox way of dealing with the enemies of the faith (and, in all fairness, was not the historical norm in the Western Church except for a brief and very ugly period immediately after it left communion with the Orthodox).

The normative way of dealing with heresies and heretics was simply to expose them and to break communion with them. There always remained the hope of repentance and reconciliation.

The Fathers of the Councils, when they anathematized heresy and heretics, acted as surgeons removing a cancerous growth from the body of the Church. To have refused to do so would have been as monstrous as a doctor's permitting a cancer to grow unhindered in one of her patients.

Lies matter because, ultimately, they kill. Whether materially or spiritually (or both), lies kill and lies about God lead to the death described in the Apocalypse:

...Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.(Rev. 21:6-8)

The fearful and unfaithful in the things of God will perish in a "second death" because they have tried to live while denying the Source of Life and Light and Truth. These words are directed at those who have done so willfully and intentionally. God's love for them, which will never cease, will be like a 'lake of fire' and His everlasting truth will burn as a fire in the face of their lies.

This is what judgment is all about—but let no one think that it is not freely chosen.

No one is forced to lie, no one is forced to be unfaithful, and no one is forced to pollute himself.

We cannot know whether in his last moments, Arius, like the thief on the cross, repented. We cannot know the final disposition of the heart of Nestorius, or the fate of others who ***persistently and unrepentantly*** fought against the true faith and whose only defense was their self-inflicted blindness. That is God's business alone.

But we can and we must remain steadfast in opposing their lies.

It may not be ***nice*** to talk about heresy, heretics, and judgment. But it is necessary.

God is love, truth, light, beauty..... And those words either have concrete meaning or they mean nothing at all.