

## THE CONCEPT OF PEACE AND UNITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

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*Abstract: The primary aim of this paper is to present and explain the concept of peace and unity from the perspective of Orthodox Christianity. Its core comprises the testimony of Christ's love in this world, as an utmost Christian ideal, based on Christ's commandment of love towards enemies and not repaying evil with evil but rather with goodness and love, as the basic principles of the Christian martyric ethos and pathos. This study is descriptive and describes the concept of peace and unity as essential Orthodox postulates in the context of the Orthodox theology according to the canon law, liturgical life and most importantly—the ascetic-hesychastic practice of the Holy Fathers of the Church and monasticism. The following terms are used: metanoia, Christian identity, pastoral approach (defined by the author), as well as the differences between theocentric and anthropocentric life models with various forms of social organization and identification. Thus, it offers a different perspective and implementation via an applicable model that springs from the liturgical life of the Church, which is to be set as a social example. The Church's principles of peace and unity implemented in the everyday life of each person should contribute to a higher level of awareness, responsibility and social welfare, whereas each person should be an axis uniting people and should take the role of a peacemaker.*

*Keywords: peace, unity, Christian identity, pastoral approach, metanoia*

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## 1. Introduction

Christianity is not merely a historical phenomenon and a social construct, but one’s personal experience, through which one comes to grow as a person and actualizes his given potential in reaching the determined range—deification, or godlikeness (see: Table 1).

**Table 1. The Harmony of the Ascetic-hesychastic Struggle**  
(according to this systematization everyone can find his place on the ladder of spiritual development, become aware of and reconcile the mode of his personal struggle in accordance with his spiritual development and position in the Church)

Stages of spiritual development	What is the prayer like	What is purified	What is stressed in the struggle	The temptations are mainly	The mode of organization of monastic life	Clerical rank	Obedience	Love
I. Purification	oral or with the mind	the energy of the mind	placing of the mind in a process of healing (ascetic humility)	from within (due to the captivity to passions)	coenobium	deacon	absolute obedience	eros
II. Illumination	ascetic mind- and heart prayer	the essence of the mind (which is in the heart)	keeping of the mind within the heart and love towards one’s enemies	from outside (through people)	skete	presbyter	depends on the level at which one’s spiritual father is	friendship closeness
III. Godlikeness	unceasing or graceful mind- and heart prayer	deification of the whole man—both body and soul	prayer and mourning for the whole world	from outside (through people and from the demon himself)	hermitage	bishop	not to a man	love

*Source: Ilievski, 2015a, p. 167*

The above-mentioned implies realization of two aspects: (1) *Inner aspect*, as a process of metanoia<sup>2</sup>—transformation of one’s energy of the mind through an ascetic<sup>3</sup> struggle of the mind-and-heart prayer.<sup>4</sup> (2) *Outer aspect*, or one’s transformed acting into the world (Ilievskva, 2020). Thus, Christian identity is realized from the aspect of Orthodox Christianity.

Christians possess and realize this unique Christian identity as their essence of life, following the example and teaching of the Godman Jesus Christ. Hence, Christian identity has a relational dimension—it is acquired during the process of building a personal relation with God, with one’s spiritual father<sup>5</sup> and with community members that comprise the body of Christ. Christian identity is affirmed through the relation and the existential position that one manifests towards his his fellowmen, „Christian identity is constructed relationally. [...] Jesus told his disciples, *From how you love one another they will recognize you as my disciples*, thus preventing a self-referential use of identity markers“ (Bartoli, 2007, p. 50).

The concept of peace from the perspective of Orthodox Christianity is not a social or a political act; on the contrary, it is a spiritual category and, above all, one’s inner accomplishment and attitude towards action; “Peace is both a gift of God and a human work. It must be constructed on the basis of central human values: truth, justice, freedom, and love“ (Thompson, 2000, p. 1).

The primary embodiment of such peace is the God-man Jesus Christ. “The Hebrew term *shalom* in the New Testament signifies the concept of harmony with God, self, and other people made possible through Christ, who unites human beings to God and to each other (cf. Rom. 14:17; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 2:13–16; Phil. 4:6–7)” (Allen & Sparks, 1997, p. 804). “The church should stand as the temple of the unchanging God who is ‘not [a God] of disorder but of peace’ (1 Cor. 14:33), the God who offers stability and a safe refuge and anchorage from life’s storms (Is. 33:6; cf. Is. 4:6; 32:2; Heb. 6:19; 13:8). Christians should be able to look to the church as a place which treasures her continuity with the communion of saints through the centuries and across national borders” (Lockwood, 2000).

Christ’s appearance at a specific historic moment brings the greatest spiritual evolution and transformation instead of the awaited social revolution of the enslaved Jewish people, who were waiting for their Messiah (the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation prophesied in the Hebrew Bible) in the form of a political figure that would assure their freedom and unity, but with political and military methods (Stefon et al., 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> Metanoia—“a change of mind” through which one directs his entire life towards God.

<sup>3</sup> Asceticism is man’s struggle to keep the commandments of Christ. It encompasses not only his bodily and spiritual effort, but also the method by which he passes through the three stages of the spiritual life, namely: purification of the heart, illumination of the mind, and deification (godlikeness).

<sup>4</sup> Mind-and-heart prayer—prayer done with the mind without distraction within the heart. It is the highest form of prayer in which the mind is kept in the heart by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> Spiritual father—a ‘charismatic’ and prophetic figure, accredited for his task by the direct action of the Holy Spirit (Ware, 1974, pp. 296-313).

Christ—with the new and almost paradoxical teaching for peace, non-violence, not repaying evil with evil, and love even towards one’s enemies—opens a new historical age, a new act, and creates a new and higher value system, which outreaches the limits of morality and it is at the level of spiritual aesthetics and ethics. Namely, from this perspective, peace is a spiritual gain, a gift of the Holy Spirit. “This interpretation leads us to believe that peacemaking emerges first in a human heart open to the Spirit and capable of responding creatively to a given historical moment” (Bartoli, 2007, p. 51). Such understanding of peace is closely associated with the commandment of forgiveness and reconciliation, which, as basic doctrines and direct actualization of the spiritual life, “seem to be offered as a form of discipline and structure that allows the creative response of the human heart to open to the Spirit to emerge and be actualized” (Bartoli, 2007, p. 51).

The idea of spreading Christianity is particularly based on Christ’s commandment of loving one’s enemies, not repaying evil with evil, but with goodness and love (Popovich, 1998a, p. 272); by undergoing martyrdom (in blood or in conscience), that is, with the testimony of Christ’s love in this world.

Love is not about sacrificing the enemy’s soul for one’s fellowmen, but as Christ says, *Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends* (John 15:13). Greater love has no one than—by testifying Christ’s love to the level of martyrdom for Him—to lay down one’s life even for the salvation of his “enemies.”

The Christian Church is formed in accordance with these commandments, “The church is a community of peace and of peacemaking, and it is such because it has been brought into being by *the gospel of peace* (Eph. 6:15). That is, the church is—and is to become—a living embodiment of God’s peacemaking good news in Christ” (Gorman, 2015, p. 142).

The overall life of Christians should be a struggle and a testimony to the Gospel writings, while Christians themselves should be peacemakers who are implementing peace and unity in all aspects of their existence.

## 2. A loving Response to Human Evil

*Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. The servant’s name was Malchus. Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” (John 18:10–11). “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” (Matt. 26:52–54). And he touched the man’s ear and healed him (Luke 22:51).*

In these Gospel extracts the God-man Jesus Christ testifies that Christians are obliged to endure all temptations so that the will of God may be fulfilled and not their own will; that His, and therefore their Kingdom, is not of this world, and that they should respond to the enemy’s evil with love (*cf.* Matt. 5:38–39, 43–44; Luke 6:27–30, 35–36).

“The witness of the Early Fathers tells us that Jesus’s command to ‘love your enemies’ was the major reason for their refusal to shed blood. Even Roman soldiers converted to Christianity. St. Martin of Tours (316-397 CE) was representative when he stated, ‘Hitherto I have served you as a soldier, let me now serve Christ... I am a soldier of Christ and it is not lawful for me to fight’.

Proscriptions and exhortations against Christians participating in blood-letting are found throughout early Christian teaching. They include the *Didache* (composed between 70 and 90 CE), Justin Martyr (100-165 CE), Tertullian (160-220 CE), Origen (185-254 CE), Maximilian (274-295 CE), the *Canons of Hippolytus* (third to fifth centuries CE), and Pelagius (ca. 350-ca. 420 CE)” (Fahey, 2018, p. 8).

For example, according to the Apostolic Tradition (Canon 16:9-11), “A soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if he is commanded, and to refuse to take an oath; if he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected. A military commander or civic magistrate that wears the purple must resign or be rejected. If a catechumen or a believer seeks to become a soldier, they must be rejected, for they have despised God” (Easton, 1962, p. 43).

The attitude of the Orthodox Christianity is decisive: what is Holy cannot be defended with weapons! Isn’t the God-man Christ the greatest Sacrament? Aren’t the Christians going to obey His commandment and follow His example?

Canon 27 of the Holy Apostles clearly states: “As for a Bishop, or Presbyter, or Deacon that strikes believers for sinning, or unbelievers for wrong-doing, with the idea of making them afraid, we command that he be deposed from office. For the Lord has nowhere taught that: on the contrary, He Himself when struck did not strike back; when reviled, He did not revile His revilers; when suffering, He did not threaten” (PBF, 2005, p. 43).

Saint Basil the Great (329-379 CE) has the same attitude towards this issue (PBF, 2005, p. 483), “As for those who resist robbers [and kill them], if they themselves are outside of the Church [laymen], they are to be excluded from communion with the good boon [the Holy Eucharist]; but if they are Clerics, they are to be deprived of their rank. For every man, it says, who takes to the sword shall die by the sword (Matt. 26:52)” (Canon of St. Basil the Great, 55).

“Whoever has given his neighbor a blow is a murderer, whether he started the fight or was defending himself” (Canon of St. Basil the Great, 43) (PBF, 2005, p. 479).

The Christian Church should be an epitome of Christ’s loving response to evil, by promoting peace, non-violence, and non-blood-shedding, “Church is simply forbidden by its doctrine to promote violence, condone it and justify the causes of conflict” (Gbotoe & Kgatla, 2017, p. 7).

### 3. Christian identity

To be a Christian means to live like Christ and to live in Christ. This does not imply belonging to formal structures, but above all, abiding of the mind in the words of the

Jesus prayer,<sup>6</sup> partaking in the Holy Mysteries, that is, living a liturgical life and communing with the body of Christ—the loving community of its members (cf. Eph. 4:15).

The Church Herself does not have a formal institutional character, but above all, it is “a true and living union of the holy in the One holy Lord, a union of the holy in the Holy Mysteries and among each other in Christ (hence, not only as *communio in sacris*, but as *communio sanctorum*), or to be more concise, as a union and communing in the one and only all-embracing mystery of Christ (cf. Eph. 3:4, 5:32; Col. 2:2, 4:3), which is the Church, as the one and only Eucharistic and ecclesiological Body of the Godman Christ” (Atanasije, 2000, p. 328).

Christian identity, on a personal level, is formed in one’s spiritual heart<sup>7</sup> through an ascetic-hesychastic<sup>8</sup> struggle, in building personal union with God and—through God—with one’s fellowmen. Therefore, the Christian cleanses his heart from the passions of vainglory, avarice, and carnal pleasures (Naum, 2009, p. 143), which are a disease of the powers of the soul and their abuse; through habit they have become one’s second nature. By God’s grace and through one’s struggle, passions should be transformed into virtues, so that all powers of the soul may act in a healthy way, according to God’s will. This requires a spiritual struggle in the Church, continually transforming oneself and growing through the three stages of the spiritual development. Unchanging personal criterion for verification of one’s spiritual state is the God-man Christ and His words, *therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect* (Matt. 5:48).

Christ is the only Savior (Messiah), the Peacemaker, the King of the Heavenly Kingdom, yet a loyal servant. This is utterly paradoxical and it is defined by the author as *antinomic leadership*, “You guide, not by having others serve you but by serving them instead—by example. It is leadership of personal and powerful testimony to Christ, testimony in power, which leaves no one indifferent. It is leadership that does not depend solely on the leader but also on his followers, on their dedication; it has a catholic,<sup>9</sup> church dimension” (Ilievski, 2015b, p. 325).

All of this is incorporated in the Christian identity, which has a central role that is accomplished by establishing and realizing the essence of peace and unity. Christians

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<sup>6</sup> The Jesus prayer—a short prayer, which is continually repeated, usually consisting of the words: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

<sup>7</sup> In patristic usage, the heart is both spiritual and physical. The spiritual heart is located in the physical heart as in an organ (Palamas, 1983, p. 43), which is man’s natural, para-natural, and supernatural center (Hagiorite, 1989, pp. 154-157), and it is the path for the mind to return to the spiritual heart.

<sup>8</sup> The term *hesychia* can mean either external stillness or internal, noetic stillness. “Hesychia” in the ascetic practice of stillness of the mind is linked with watchfulness and deepened by the unceasing Jesus prayer. Hesychia is an undisturbed mind and a heart with peace, and from influences of the environment. It is dwelling in God. The only way man to achieve deification is through hesychia.

<sup>9</sup> The word *catholic* is derived from the Greek adverbial καθόλου (*katholou*), which means ‘on the whole’. The word here describes the church as universal and widespread, the whole being represented in each local church.

may identify solely with Christ, for every other identification for them means falling out from Christ and losing the Christian identity (*cf.* Matt. 10:32–33, 37–38).

In Christianity there is no other identity except the one described above; every other identification outside of this identity is alienation from the essential determination and true existence. Namely, in the course of time, Christians—instead of striving to reach this Christian ideal, that is, ethos—they depart from it and identify themselves with the outward forms of identity: the state, the nation, and the political party (Naum, 2018, p. 124).

### 3.1. *The Three Basic Falls of Christians*

In what way do Christians seek safety and security in this world and the “earthly kingdom,” while renouncing the Heavenly one and the God-man Christ at the same time?

The attitude towards this issue determines the key identification and the crucial difference between the anthropocentric and the theocentric model of life (Ilievski & Ilievska, 2018a, pp. 209-212).

Firstly, the Christians and clergy of today have a subtle tendency (consciously or unconsciously)—starting from themselves and their closest family to the wider community—to create some kind of “earthly kingdom” in which they would satisfy all their passions—vainglory, avarice, and carnal pleasures, without realizing that in this way they renounce the Heavenly Kingdom. In other words, they want to have inner peace, feel good at all times, have their needs completely satisfied, never lack anything or suffer from something that would interfere with their way of living.

Secondly, when Christians seek safety, that is, they satisfy their needs of life outside God. For example, when they primarily and essentially seek their safety and security in the state, nation or political party, their family, or in other types of merely human, worldly organizations, often business groups; when they feel secure only due to human authority, possessions or money they have. This kind of egocentric establishment of their security is renouncing the Cross of Christ, the God-man Christ, and ultimately the Kingdom of Heaven.

In order to fulfill Christ’s commandment, it is necessary for Christians to avoid attaching and identifying themselves to anything worldly: neither through self-love—on a personal level, family or through the state and the nation to which they belong, nor through any other type of earthly human organization—on a social level, by which they would be forced to draw a sword and repay evil with evil. Identification is one thing, and a pastoral approach quite another.

However, throughout history, Christians have fallen in three main temptations:

1) *Identification with their state.* During the persecution of the Church by the state there is no evidence that the Christian martyrs offered resistance in order to protect themselves and their families (Palamas, 2014, p. 390), although it frequently happened that over twenty thousand people were killed in one day (Popovich, 1998b, p. 789). However, once the Church was recognized by the state (Stefon et al., 2019), it is suddenly

noticed how nominal Christians (Poll, 2018, pp. 1-3) take up swords and kill people with the excuse of defending the Christian state, the church, themselves, and their families from the non-believers.

2) *Identification with their nation.* When nominal believers identify themselves with their “nation,” suddenly it can be seen how Orthodox Christian brothers start killing each other.

3) *Identification with a political party.* The greatest absurdity is when nominal Christians identify themselves with a political party, and for example, Macedonians begin to hate and kill Orthodox Macedonians overnight (Naum, 2017, pp. 83-84).

How are these falls or identifications reflected on a personal psychological level?

When falling to the first temptation, the so-called nominal Christians are at the stage of a religious neurosis — they do not have control over their own thoughts, feelings, words and deeds, and being in such a condition they easily take up weapons in their hands and repay evil with evil. The fall to the second temptation leads to a religious personality disorder (the so-called psychopaths and sociopaths), which leads to brothers by faith striving physically and spiritually to eliminate each other in a brutal way (Ierotich, 2000, p. 70). Now, if any of them, especially the ruling class (the ecclesiastical ruling authorities, above all), does this on purpose, being fully aware of choosing evil, then they have the most dangerous form of psychosis—demonic possession (Ilievski & Ilievska, 2019, p. 20). The fall to the third temptation is pure evil.

This secularization is followed by disintegration from the whole and instead of peace and unity, the differences and the polarities are emphasized. Hence, a polarized nation is a broken nation (Esteban & Schneider, 2008, pp. 131-141). Furthermore, it results in discord, conflict, and disintegration, which inevitably leads towards violence and war conflicts where blood is shed. “The assertions can also explain that disunity within a particular society or state has the inclination of giving birth to complex social issues that often bring into existence a host of social conflicts” (Gbotoe & Kgatla, 2017, p. 3).

### *3.2 Whole and Part*

The natural behavior of the God-man Christ is to unite and serve in a loving manner. Both the Church and the followers of Christ act in such a manner. This model of peace and unity should be implemented in society, “The emergence of a peaceful society is preconditioned or dependent on the willingness of the people to live side by side as a homogenous community. According to scripture, the homogeneity of humanity allows or makes room for lasting peace in the society” (Gbotoe & Kgatla, 2017, p. 7).

Opposite to this integrated and wholesome functioning is the disintegration and particularization, through which the unconscious part of human nature is awoken with all of its aggressive pulses, which, if not censored by the civilizational upgrading of the

Superego,<sup>10</sup> result in disinhibited and open manifestation of violence. This is known as the psychological state “below” by which Galtung further defines “violence as being the outcome of humankind acting below the ‘somatic and mental realization’ of their actual state of mind” (Galtung, 1996, p. 168).

The evil uses Christians’ personal inner split, their incompleteness and spiritual illness, that is, the split between the primary function of their non-illuminated mind and its secondary function—the overfed intellect (Ilievski & Ilievska, 2019). Through this inner split of the mind, the evil manages to present a single part of the whole to seem as the whole itself, while overlooking the whole. Naturally, this overlooking is in accordance with their passions.

In its initial phase, the split between the two functions of the mind is called delusion, that is, a false state of mind (Brianchaninov, 1998, p. 78); in its final phase—after the thoughts emerging from the mind have been accepted in one’s heart—it is called illusion (Naum, 2015, p. 134).

The one who abides in delusion or illusion has no inner peace. They project their inner conflict in the outward reality and from such a paranoid existential position (Berne, 1964) they act destructively.

#### 4. Pastoral Approach

In order for Christians to have a pastoral approach to social phenomena, they have to be at the stage of illumination of the mind with the gift of the mind-and-heart prayer, or to be at least struggling to cleanse their heart from the passions through obedience, preferably to a true spiritual father (see Table 1.).

Obedience is activation of the primary function of the mind—uniting one’s created energy with God’s uncreated energy through prayer, as well as redirecting of the secondary function of the mind towards fulfillment of God’s commandments. Obedience is a process of divine transformation, of one’s growth and maturation to the dignity of God’s son (*cf.* Eph. 3:26; 1. John 3:1) (Naum, 2017, p. 191).

The primary and only weapon of Christians is their spirit. “Every Christian, even the lowliest, has been endowed with the Holy Spirit in Baptism (1 Cor. 12:13; *cf.* Acts 2:17–18) and is called to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit by the Spirit’s power. Such fruit, all of which should be evident in the lives of all Christians, includes *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, humility, and self-control* (Gal. 5:22–23)” (Lockwood, 2000).

Therefore, the basic goal of Christianity is the inner transformation, that is, transformation of the energy of the mind (the rational power of the soul) through its primary function—prayerful union with God (with His uncreated energy). Once transformed, the one and the same energy of the mind acts in a transformed way through its secondary function as well—the communication with this world. Hence, only

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<sup>10</sup> The ethical component of the personality that provides the moral standards by which the ego operates.

the Christian who has undergone divine transformation (Palamas, 2014, p. 442) and has reached the maturity of *a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* (Eph. 4:13) may act as a peacemaker in the outer world—in the family and in the wider social context. *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God* (Matt. 5:9).

In this way, the Christian has acquired the pastoral approach (Naum, 2018, pp. 131-132) as opposed to the mass phenomena of limiting one's spiritual identity with outward forms of identification—the state, the nation, and the political party, which partialize and fragmentize his whole, not only as a personal, but as a spiritual entity as well. There is only one identity for Christians—the Christian one (Ilievski & Ilievska, 2018b). Any other identification is a betrayal of the Christian identity.

The acquisition of Christian identity is the prerequisite for implementation of the pastoral approach. It is an approach of unifying and promoting peace, “The experience and teaching of Orthodox Christianity do not fit neatly within the familiar categories of pacifism, just war theory and holy war. Instead, they provide pastoral resources for the pursuit of a dynamic praxis of peace, the manifestation of which takes various forms in light of the set of circumstances that the Orthodox community faces” (LeMasters, 2011, p. 54).

The pastoral approach towards a state, a nation, and a political party transforms these schemes and makes them stronger. It sanctifies Christians, whereas their identification with a state, a nation, or a political party destroys these schemes, and Christians become blinded. Through the darkness of the identification, the other—the one that is different—is excluded, and since one renounces the Christian identity, he ceases to be a transmitter of God's grace towards the subject with which he identifies and which contributes to its devastation.

## 5. Conclusion

The Orthodox faith has peace and unity as its primary premise. Its promotion goes through its doctrines and canons, which are derived from the Gospel ideal, compliant with the Person of Jesus Christ and later handed down by the Holy Apostles and the Holy Church Fathers. The Christian Church may be experienced through the liturgical life, in the Holy Eucharist, in which and through which the Church is manifested in Her unity as a union of the faithful in Christ, as the body of Christ. “The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church” (Allen & Sparks, 1997, p. xiii) is a bearer of the archetype of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Only such a Church with a prophetic mission is able to implement its missionary and pastoral principles in society: to lead, to educate, to unite and to serve as a practically applicable social model. This should be the model by which societies are shaped, nations are united by the principles of unity, community and tolerance, and leaders are guided by the principle of antinomic leadership, as a service to citizens and a promoter of higher moral, ethical and spiritual-aesthetic norms and values.

In the light of the pastoral approach, the Christian embraces everyone, without any exception, and being a transmitter of God's grace, he transforms and saves all things and people among which he acts in a pastoral way.

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