

**THE DESCENT OF CHRIST INTO HADES**  
IN EASTERN AND WESTERN THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS  
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The Byzantine and old Russian icons of the Resurrection of Christ never depict the resurrection itself, i.e., Christ coming out of the grave. They rather depict ‘the descent of Christ into Hades’, or to be more precise, the rising of Christ out of hell. Christ, sometimes with a cross in his hand, is represented as raising Adam, Eve and other personages of the biblical history from hell. Under the Saviour’s feet is the black abyss of the nether world; against its background are castles, locks and debris of the gates which once barred the way of the dead to resurrection. Though other motifs have also been used in creating the image of the Resurrection of Christ in the last several centuries<sup>[1]</sup>, the above-described iconographic type is considered to be canonical, as it reflects the traditional teaching on the descent of Christ to hell, His victory over death, His raising of the dead and delivering them from hell where they were imprisoned before His Resurrection. It is to this teaching as an integral part of the dogmatic and liturgical tradition of the Christian Church that this paper is devoted.

The descent of Christ into Hades is one of the most mysterious, enigmatic and inexplicable events in New Testament history. In today’s Christian world, this event is understood differently. Liberal Western theology rejects altogether any possibility for speaking of the descent of Christ into Hades literally, arguing that the scriptural texts on this theme should be understood metaphorically. The traditional Catholic doctrine insists that after His death on the cross Christ descended to hell only to deliver the Old Testament righteous from it. A similar understanding is quite widespread among Orthodox Christians.

On the other hand, the New Testament speaks of the preaching of Christ in hell as addressed to the unrepentant sinners: ‘For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirit in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited’<sup>[2]</sup>. However, many Church Fathers and liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church repeatedly underline that having descended to hell, Christ opened the way to salvation for all people, not only the Old Testament righteous. The descent of Christ into Hades is perceived as an event of cosmic significance involving all people without exception. They also speak about the victory of Christ over death, the full devastation of hell and that after the descent of Christ into Hades there was nobody left there except for the devil and demons.

How can these two points of view be reconciled? What was the original faith of the Church? What do early Christian sources tell us about the descent into Hades? And what is the soteriological significance of the descent of Christ into Hades?

### 1. Eastern theological tradition

We come across references to the descent of Christ into Hades and His raising the dead in the works of Eastern Christian authors of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, such as Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch, Hermas, Justin, Melito of Sardes, Hyppolitus of Rome, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In the 4th century, the descent to hell was discussed by Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, as well as such Syrian authors as Jacob Aphrahat and Ephrem the Syrian. Noteworthy among later authors who wrote on this theme are Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene.

Let us look at the most vivid interpretations given to our theme in Eastern Christian theology.

The teaching on the descent of Christ into Hades was expounded quite fully by Clement of Alexandria in his ‘Stromateis’<sup>[3]</sup>. He argued that Christ preached in hell not only to the Old Testament righteous, but also to the Gentiles who lived outside the true faith. Commenting on 1 Pet. 3:18-21, Clement expresses the conviction that the preaching of Christ was addressed to all those in hell who were able to believe in Christ:

Do not [the Scriptures] show that the Lord preached the Gospel to those that perished in the flood, or rather had been chained, and to those kept 'in ward and guard'?... And, as I think, the Saviour also exerts His might because it is His work to save; which accordingly He also did by drawing to salvation those who became willing, by the preaching [of the Gospel], to believe on Him, wherever they were. If, then, the Lord descended to Hades for no other end but to preach the Gospel, as He did descend, it was either to preach the Gospel to all or to the Hebrews only. If, accordingly, to all, then all who believe shall be saved<sup>[4]</sup>, although they may be of the Gentiles, on making their profession there...<sup>[5]</sup>

Clement emphasises that there are righteous people among both those who have the true faith and the Gentiles and that it is possible to turn to God for those who did not believe in Him while living. It is their virtuous life that made them capable of accepting the preaching of Christ and the apostles in hell:

...A righteous man, then, differs not, as righteous, from another righteous man, whether he be of the Law [Jew] or a Greek. For God is not only Lord of the Jews, but of all men<sup>[6]</sup>... So I think it is demonstrated that God, being good, and the Lord powerful, save with a righteousness and equality which extend to all that turn to Him, whether here or elsewhere<sup>[7]</sup>.

According to Clement, righteousness is of value not only for those who live in true faith, but also for those who are outside faith. It is evident from his words that Christ preached in hell to all, but saved only those who came to believe in Him. Anyway, Clement assumes that this preaching proved salutary not for all to whom Christ preached in hell: 'Did not the same dispensation obtain in Hades, so that even there, all the souls, on hearing the proclamation, might either exhibit repentance, or confess that their punishment was just, because they believed not?'<sup>[8]</sup> According to Clement, there were those in hell who heard the preaching of Christ but did not believe in Him and did not follow Him.

In Clement's works we find the notion that punishments sent from God to sinners are aimed at their reformation, not at retribution, and that the souls released from their corporal shells are better able to understand the meaning of punishment<sup>[9]</sup>. In these words lies the nucleus of the teaching on the purifying and saving nature of the torment of hell developed by some later authors<sup>[10]</sup>. We will come back to the question of whether the pains of hell can be salutary when considering the teaching of Maximus the Confessor on the descent of Christ into Hades. An exhaustive discussion on this question, though, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Gregory of Nyssa entwines the theme of the descent in hell with the theory of 'divine deception'. On the latter he builds his teaching on the Redemption. According to this theory, Christ, being God incarnate, deliberately concealed His divine nature from the devil so that he, mistaking Him for an ordinary man, would not be terrified at the sight of an overwhelming power approaching him. When Christ descended in hell, the devil supposed Him to be a human being, but this was a divine 'hook' disguised under a human 'bait' that the devil swallowed<sup>[11]</sup>. By admitting God incarnate into his domain, the devil himself signed his own death warrant: incapable of enduring the divine presence, he was overcome and defeated, and hell was destroyed.

This is precisely the idea that Gregory of Nyssa developed in one of his Easter sermons on 'The Three-Day Period of the Resurrection of Christ'. Judging by its contents, this homily was intended for Holy Saturday<sup>[12]</sup>, and in it Gregory poses the question of why Christ spent three days 'in the heart of the earth'<sup>[13]</sup>. This period was necessary and sufficient, he argues, for Christ to 'expose the foolishness' (*moranoi*) of the devil<sup>[14]</sup>, i.e. to outwit, ridicule and deceive him<sup>[15]</sup>. How did Christ manage to 'outwit' the devil? Gregory gives the following reply to this question:

As the ruler of darkness could not approach the presence of the Light unimpeded, had he not seen in Him something of flesh, then, as soon as he saw the God-bearing flesh and saw the miracle performed through it by the Deity, he hoped that if he came to take hold of the flesh through death, then he would take hold of all the power contained in it. Therefore, having swallowed the bait of the flesh, he was pierced by the hook of the Deity and thus the dragon was transfixed by the hook.<sup>[16]</sup>

A very original approach to the theme of the descent to Hades is found in a book entitled 'Spiritual Homilies' which has survived under the name of Macarius of Egypt. There, the liberation of Adam by Christ, Who descended into Hades, is seen as the prototype of the mystical resurrection which the soul experiences in its encounter with the Lord:

When you hear that the Lord in the old days delivered souls from hell and prison and that He descended into hell and performed a glorious deed, do not think that all these events are far from your soul... So the Lord comes into the souls that seek Him, into the depth of the heart's hell, and there commands death, saying: 'Release the imprisoned souls which have sought Me and which you hold by force'. And He shatters the heavy stones weighing on the soul, opens graves, raises the true dead from death, brings the imprisoned soul from the dark prison... Is it difficult for God to enter death and, even more, into the depth of the heart and to call out dead Adam from there?... If the sun, being created, passes everywhere through windows and doors, even to the caves of lions and the holes of creeping creatures, and comes out without any harm, the more so does God and the Lord of everything enter caves and abodes in which death has settled, and also souls, and, having released Adam from there, [remains] unfettered by death. Similarly, rain coming down from the sky reaches the nethermost parts of the earth, moistens and renews the roots there and gives birth to new shoots<sup>[17]</sup>.

This text is significant first of all in that the author regards the descent of Christ into Hades as a commonly accepted and undisputed dogma, which he uses as a solid foundation on which to build his mystical and typological construction. The use of the images of the sun rising over both the evil and the good, and rain sent upon both the righteous and the unrighteous<sup>[18]</sup>, indicates that the author of the 'Homilies' perceives the descent into Hades as a reality affecting not only the Old Testament righteous, but also entire humanity. Moreover, it affects every person and inner processes which take place in the human soul. For the author of the 'Homilies', the doctrine of the descent into Hades is not an abstract truth, nor is it an event which occurred in the days of old and which affected only those who lived at that time, but it is an event which has not lost its relevance. It is not just one of the fundamental Christian doctrines, not just a subject of faith and confession, but a mystery associated with the mystical life of the Christian, a mystery which one should experience in the depth of one's heart.

The doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades occupies an essential place in the works of Cyril of Alexandria. In his 'Paschal Homilies', he repeatedly mentions that as a consequence of the descent of Christ into Hades, the devil was left all alone, while hell was devastated: 'For having destroyed hell and opened the impassable gates for the departed spirits, He left the devil there abandoned and lonely'<sup>[19]</sup>.

In his 'Festive Letters', Cyril of Alexandria elaborates on the theme of the preaching of Christ in Hades, popular in the Alexandrian tradition since Clement. He views the preaching of Christ in hell as the accomplishment of the 'history of salvation', which began with the Incarnation:

...He showed the way to salvation not only to us, but also to the spirits in hell; having descended, He preached to those once disobedient, as Peter says<sup>[20]</sup>. For it did not befit for love of man to be partial, but the manifestation of [this] gift should have been extended to all nature... Having preached to the spirits in hell and having said 'go forth' to the prisoners, and 'show yourselves'<sup>[21]</sup> to those in prison on the third day, He resurrected His temple and again opens up to our nature the ascent to heaven, bringing Himself to the Father as the beginning of humanity, pledging to those on earth the grace of communion of the Spirit<sup>[22]</sup>.

As we can see, Cyril emphasises the universality of the salvation given by Christ to humanity, perceiving the descent of Christ into Hades as salvific for the entire human race. He is not inclined to limit salvation to a particular part of humanity, such as the Old Testament righteous. Salvation is likened to rain sent by God on both the just and the unjust<sup>[23]</sup>. Putting emphasis on the universality of the saving feat of Christ, Cyril follows in the steps of other Alexandrian theologians, beginning with Clement, Origen, and Athanasius the Great<sup>[24]</sup>. The descent of Christ into Hades, according to Cyril's teaching, signified victory over that which previously appeared unconquerable and ensured the salvation of all humanity:

Death unwilling to be defeated is defeated; corruption is transformed; unconquerable passion is destroyed. While hell, diseased with excessive insatiability and never satisfied with the dead, is taught, even if against its will, that which it could not learn previously. For it not only ceases to claim those who are still to fall [in the future], but also lets free those already captured, being subjected to splendid devastation by the power of our Saviour... Having preached to the spirits in hell, once disobedient, He came out as conqueror by resurrecting His temple like a beginning of our hope and by showing to [our] nature the manner of the raising from the dead, and giving us along with it other blessings as well<sup>[25]</sup>.

Clearly, Cyril perceived the victory of Christ over hell and death as complete and definitive. According to Cyril, hell loses authority both over those who were in its power and those who are to become its prey in the future. Thus, the descent into Hades, a single and unique action, is perceived as a timeless event. The raised body of Christ becomes the guarantee of universal salvation, the beginning of way leading human nature to ultimate deification.

An elaborate teaching of the descent of Christ into Hades is found in Maximus the Confessor. In his analysis, Maximus takes as a starting point the words of St. Peter: 'For this cause was the Gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit'<sup>[26]</sup>. In Maximus's view, St. Peter does not speak about the Old Testament righteous, but about those sinners who, back in their lifetime, were punished for their evil deeds:

Some say that Scriptures call 'dead' those who died before the coming of Christ, for instance, those who were at the time of the flood, at Babel, in Sodom, in Egypt, as well as others who in various times and in various ways received various punishments and the terrible misfortune of divine damnation. These people were punished not so much for their ignorance of God as for the offences they imposed on one another. It was to them, according to [St Peter] that the great message of salvation was preached when they were already damned as men in the flesh, that is, when they received, through life in the flesh, punishment for crimes against one another, so that they could live according to God by the spirit, that is, being in hell, they accepted the preaching of the knowledge of God, believing in the Saviour who descended into hell to save the dead. So, in order to understand [this] passage in [Holy Scriptures] let us take it in this way: the dead, damned in the human flesh, were preached to precisely for the purpose that they may live according to God by the spirit<sup>[27]</sup>.

Thus, according to Maximus's teaching, punishments suffered by sinners 'in the human flesh' were necessary so that they may live 'according to God by the spirit'. Therefore, these punishments, whether troubles and misfortunes in their lifetime or pains in hell, had pedagogical and reforming significance. Moreover, Maximus stresses that in damning them, God used not so much a religious as a moral criterion, for people were punished 'not so much for their ignorance of God as for the offences they imposed on one another'. In other words, the religious or ideological convictions of a particular person were not decisive, but his actions with regard to his neighbours.

In John Damascene we find lines which sum up the development of the theme of the descent of Christ into Hades in Eastern patristic writings of the 2nd-8th centuries:

The soul [of Christ] when it is deified descended into Hades, in order that, just as the Sun of Righteousness rose for those upon the earth, so likewise He might bring light<sup>[28]</sup> to those who sit under the earth in darkness and the shadow of death: in order that just as he brought the message of peace to those upon the earth, and of release to the prisoners, and of sight to the blind<sup>[29]</sup>, and became to those who believed the Author of everlasting salvation and to those who did not believe, a denunciation of their unbelief, so He might become the same to those in Hades: That every knee should bow to Him, of things in heaven, and things in earth and things under the earth<sup>[30]</sup>. And thus after He had freed those who has been bound for ages, straightway He rose again from the dead, showing us the way of resurrection<sup>[31]</sup>.

According to John Damascene, Christ preached to all those who were in hell, but His preaching did not prove salutary for all, as not all were capable of responding to it. For some it could become only 'a

denunciation of their disbelief', not the cause of salvation. In this judgement, Damascene actually repeats the teaching on salvation articulated not long before him by Maximus the Confessor. According to Maximus, human history will be accomplished when all without exception will unite with God and God will become 'all in all'<sup>[32]</sup>. For some, however, this unity will mean eternal bliss, while for others it will become the source of suffering and torment, as each will be united with God 'according to the quality of his disposition' towards God<sup>[33]</sup>. In other words, all will be united with God, but each will have his own, subjective, feeling of this unity, according to the measure of the closeness to God he has achieved. Along a similar line, John Damascene understands also the teaching on the descent to Hades: Christ opens the way to paradise to all and calls all to salvation, but the response to Christ's call may lie in either consent to follow Him or voluntary rejection of salvation. Ultimately it depends on a person, on his free choice. God does not save anybody by force, but calls everybody to salvation: 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him'<sup>[34]</sup>. God knocks at the door of the human heart rather than breaks into it.

In the history of Christianity an idea has repeatedly arisen that God predestines some people for salvation and others to perdition. This idea, based as it is on the literary understanding of the words of St. Paul about predestination, calling and justification<sup>[35]</sup>, became the corner-stone of the theological system of the Reformation, preached with particular consistency by John Calvin<sup>[36]</sup>. Eleven centuries before Calvin, the Eastern Christian tradition in the person of John Chrysostom expressed its view of predestination and calling. 'Why are not all saved?' Chrysostom asks. 'Because... not only the call [of God] but also the will of those called is the cause of their salvation. This call is not coercive or forcible. Every one was called, but not all followed the call'<sup>[37]</sup>. Later Fathers, including Maximus and John Damascene, spoke in the same spirit. According to their teaching, it is not God who saves some while ruining others, but some people follow the call of God to salvation while others do not. It is not God who leads some from hell while leaving others behind, but some people wish while others do not wish to believe in Him.

The teaching of the Eastern Church Fathers on the descent of Christ into Hades can be summed up in the following points:

- 1) the doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades was commonly accepted and indisputable;
- 2) the descent into Hades was perceived as an event of universal significance, though some authors limited the range of those saved by Christ to a particular category of the dead;
- 3) the descent of Christ into Hades and His resurrection were viewed as the accomplishment of the 'economy' of Christ the Saviour, as the crown and outcome of the feat He performed for the salvation of people;
- 4) the teaching on the victory of Christ over the devil, hell and death was finally articulated and asserted;
- 5) the theme of the descent into Hades began to be viewed in its mystical dimension, as the prototype of the resurrection of the human soul.

## 2. Western theological tradition

To what degree did the approach to this theme of the Fathers and Doctors of the Western Church differ from that of the Eastern Fathers? In order to answer this question, let us look at the works of the two most significant theologians of the Christian West, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

The Augustinian teaching on the descent of Christ into Hades is expounded in the fullest way in one of his letters addressed to Evodius. This letter contains a comprehensive interpretation of 1 Pet. 3:18-21. It follows from Evodius' questions that the teaching on the evacuation of all in hell and the complete devastation of hell by the risen Christ was widespread in his time. Augustine begins with the question of whether Christ preached only to those who perished in the days of Noah or to all the imprisoned. In answering it, Augustine begins by refuting the opinion that Christ descended to Hades in the flesh<sup>[38]</sup>

and argues that this teaching contradicts scriptural testimony<sup>[39]</sup>.

Augustine continues by setting forth the view that Christ led from hell all those who were there, as, indeed, among them were ‘some who are intimately known to us by their literary labours, whose eloquence and talent we admire, ? not only the poets and orators who in many parts of their writings have held up to contempt and ridicule these same false gods of the nations, and have even occasionally confessed the one true God..., but also those who have uttered the same, not in poetry or rhetoric, but as philosophers’<sup>[40]</sup>. The notion of the salvation of heathen poets, orators and philosophers was quite popular. In Eastern patristic tradition it was most vividly expressed by Clement of Alexandria. According to Augustine, however, any of the positive qualities of the ancient poets, orators and philosophers originated not from ‘sober and authentic devotion, but pride, vanity and [the desire] of people’s praise’. Therefore they ‘did not bring any fruit’. Thus, the idea that pagan poets, orators and philosophers could be saved, though not refuted by Augustine, still is not fully approved, since ‘human judgement’ differs from ‘the justice of the Creator’<sup>[41]</sup>.

Augustine neither rejects nor accepts unconditionally the opinion concerning the salvation of all those in hell. Though very careful in his judgement, it is clear that the possibility of salvation for all in hell is blocked in his perception by his own teaching on predestination<sup>[42]</sup>, as well as by his understanding of divine mercy and justice:

For the words of Scripture, that ‘the pains of hell were loosed’<sup>[43]</sup> by the death of Christ, do not establish this, seeing that this statement may be understood as referring to Himself, and meaning that he so far loosed (that is, made ineffectual) the pains of hell that He Himself was not held by them, especially since it is added that it was ‘impossible for Him to be holden of them’<sup>[44]</sup>. Or if any one [objecting to this interpretation] asks why He chose to descend into hell, where those pains were which could not possibly hold Him... the words that ‘the pains were loosed’ may be understood as referring not to the case of all, but only some whom He judged worthy of that deliverance; so that neither He supposed to have descended thither in vain, without the purpose of bringing benefit to any of those who were there held in prison, nor is it a necessary inference that divine mercy and justice granted to some must be supposed to have been granted to all<sup>[45]</sup>.

While Augustine also considers the traditional teaching that Christ delivered from hell the forefather Adam, as well as Abel, Seth, Noah and his family, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob ‘and the other patriarchs and prophets’, he does not agree to it entirely, since he does not believe ‘Abraham’s bosom’ to be a part of hell. Those who were in the bosom of Abraham were not deprived of the gracious presence of the divinity of Christ, and therefore Christ, on the very day of His death immediately before descending to hell, promises to the wise thief that he will be in paradise with him<sup>[46]</sup>. ‘Most certainly, therefore, He was, before that time, both in paradise and the bosom of Abraham in His beatific wisdom (*beatificante sapientia*), and in hell in His condemning power (*judicante potentia*)’, concludes Augustine<sup>[47]</sup>.

The opinion that through the death of Christ on the cross the righteous receive that promised incorruption which people are to achieve after the end of time is also refuted by Augustine. If it were so, then St. Peter would not have said about David that ‘his sepulchre is with us to this day’<sup>[48]</sup> unless David was still undisturbed in the sepulchre<sup>[49]</sup>.

As for the teaching on Christ’s preaching in hell contained in 1 Pet. 3:18-21, Augustine rejects its traditional and commonly accepted understanding. First, he is not certain that it implies those who really departed his life, but rather those that are spiritually dead and did not believe in Christ. Secondly, he offers the quite novel idea that after Christ ascended from hell His recollection did not survive there. Therefore, the descent in Hades was a ‘one-time’ event relevant only to those who were in hell at that time. Thirdly and finally, Augustine rejects altogether any possibility for those who did not believe in Christ while on earth to come to believe in him while in hell, calling this idea ‘absurd’<sup>[50]</sup>.

Augustine is not inclined to see in 1 Pet. 3:18-21 an indication of the descent into Hades. He believes that this text should be understood allegorically, i. e., ‘the spirits’ mentioned by Peter are essentially those who are clothed in body and imprisoned in ignorance. Christ did not come down to earth in the

flesh in the days of Noah, but often came down to people in the spirit either to rebuke those who did not believe or to justify those who did. What happened in the days of Noah is a type of what happens today, and the flood was the precursor of baptism. Those who believe in our days are like those who believed in the days of Noah: they are saved through baptism, just as Noah was saved through water. Those who do not believe are like those who did not believe in the days of Noah: the flood is the prototype of their destruction<sup>[51]</sup>.

Augustine is the first Latin author who gave so much close attention to the theme of the descent of Christ into Hades. However, he did not clarify the question of who was the object of Christ's preaching in hell and whom Christ delivered from it. Augustine expressed many doubts about particular interpretations of 1 Pet. 3:18-21, but did not offer any convincing interpretation of his own. Nevertheless, the ideas expressed by him were developed by Western Church authors of the later period. Thomas Aquinas, in particular, makes continuous references to Augustine in his chapter devoted to the descent of Christ into Hades<sup>[52]</sup>. During the Reformation, many Augustinian ideas were criticised by theologians of the Protestant tradition. The teaching that the recollection of Christ did not survive in hell after His ascent was rejected by Lutheran theologians who insisted on the reverse<sup>[53]</sup>.

Thomas Aquinas was the 13th-century theologian who brought to completion the Latin teaching on the descent of Christ into Hades. In his 'Summa Theologiae', he divides hell into four parts: 1) purgatory (*purgatorium*), where sinners experience penal suffering; 2) the hell of the patriarchs (*infernum patrum*), the abode of the Old Testament righteous before the coming of Christ; 3) the hell of unbaptised children (*infernum puerorum*); and 4) the hell of the damned (*infernum damnatorum*). In response to the question, exactly which was the hell that Christ descended to, Thomas Aquinas admits two possibilities: Christ descended either into all parts of hell or only to that in which the righteous were imprisoned, whom He was to deliver. In the first case, 'for going down into the hell of the lost He wrought this effect, that by descending thither He put them to shame for their unbelief and wickedness: but to them who were detained in Purgatory He gave hope of attaining to glory: while upon the holy Fathers detained in hell solely on account of original sin (*pro solo peccato originali detinebantur in inferno*), He shed the light of glory everlasting'. In the second case, the soul of Christ 'descended only to the place where the righteous were detained' (*descendit solum ad locum inferni in quo iusti detinebantur*), but the action of His presence there was felt in some way in the other parts of hell as well<sup>[54]</sup>.

According to Thomistic teaching, Christ delivered from hell not only the Old Testament righteous who were imprisoned in hell because of original sin<sup>[55]</sup>. As far as sinners are concerned, those who were detained in 'the hell of the lost', since they either had no faith or had faith but no conformity with the virtue of the suffering Christ, could not be cleansed from their sins, and Christ's descent brought them no deliverance from the pains of hell<sup>[56]</sup>. Nor were children who had died in the state of original sin delivered from hell, since only 'by baptism children are delivered from original sin and from hell, but not by Christ's descent into hell', since baptism can be received only in earthly life, not after death<sup>[57]</sup>. Finally, Christ did not deliver those who were in purgatory, for their suffering was caused by personal defects (*defectus personali*), whereas 'exclusion from glory' was a common defect (*defectus generalis*) of all human nature after the fall. The descent of Christ into Hades recovered the glory of God to those who were excluded from it by virtue of the common defect of nature, but did not deliver anybody from the pains of purgatory caused by people's personal defects<sup>[58]</sup>.

This scholastic understanding of the descent of Christ into Hades, formulated by Thomas Aquinas, was the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church for many centuries. During the Reformation, this understanding was severely criticised by Protestant theologians. Many of today's Catholic theologians are also very sceptical about this teaching<sup>[59]</sup>. There is no need to discuss how far the teaching of Thomas Aquinas on the descent of Christ into Hades is from that of Eastern Christianity. No Father of the Eastern Church ever permitted himself to clarify who was left in hell after Christ descent; no Eastern Father ever spoke of unbaptised infants left in hell<sup>[60]</sup>. The division of hell into four parts and the teaching on purgatory are alien to Eastern patristics. Finally, this very scholastic approach whereby the most mysterious events of history are subjected to detailed analysis and rational interpretation is

unacceptable for Eastern Christian theology. For the theologians, poets and mystics of the Eastern Church, the descent of Christ into Hades remained first of all a mystery which could be praised in hymns, and about which various assumptions could be made, but of which nothing definite and final could be said.

The general conclusion can now be drawn from a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western understandings of the descent into Hades. In the first three centuries of the Christian Church, there was considerable similarity between the interpretation of this doctrine by theologians in East and West. However, already by the 4th-5th centuries, substantial differences can be identified. In the West, a juridical understanding of the doctrine prevailed. It gave increasingly more weight to notions of predestination (Christ delivered from hell those who were predestined for salvation from the beginning) and original sin (salvation given by Christ was deliverance from the general original sin, not from the 'personal' sins of individuals). The range of those to whom the saving action of the descent into hell is extended becomes ever more narrow. First, it excludes sinners doomed to eternal torment, then those in purgatory and finally unbaptised infants. This kind of legalism was alien to the Orthodox East, where the descent into Hades continued to be perceived in the spirit in which it is expressed in the liturgical texts of Good Friday and Easter, i.e. as an event significant not only for all people, but also for the entire cosmos, for all created life.

At the same time, both Eastern and Western traditions suggest that Christ delivered from hell the Old Testament righteous led by Adam. Yet if in the West this is perceived restrictively (Christ delivered only the Old Testament righteous, while leaving all the rest in hell to eternal torment), in the East, Adam is viewed as a symbol of the entire human race leading humanity redeemed by Christ (those who followed Christ were first the Old Testament righteous led by Adam and then the rest who responded to the preaching of Christ in hell).

### 3. The doctrine of the descent into Hades and theodicy

Let us move now to the theological significance of the doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades. This doctrine, in our view, has great significance for theodicy, the justification of God in the face of the accusing human mind<sup>[61]</sup>. Why does God permit suffering and evil? Why does He condemn people to the pains of hell? To what extent is God responsible for what happens on earth? Why in the Bible does God appear as a cruel and unmerciful Judge 'repenting' of His actions and punishing people for mistakes which He knew beforehand and which He could have prevented? These and other similar questions have been posed throughout history.

First of all, we should say that the doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades raises the veil over the mystery that envelops the relationship between God and the devil. The history of this relationship goes back to the time of the creation. According to common church teaching, the devil was created as a good and perfect creature, but he fell away from God because of his pride. The drama of the personal relationship between God and the devil did not end here. Since his falling away, the devil began to oppose divine goodness and love by every means and to do all he can to prevent the salvation of people. The devil is not all-powerful, however; his powers are restricted by God and he can operate only within the limits permitted by God. This last affirmation is confirmed by the opening lines of the Book of Job where the devil appears as a creature having, first, personal relations with God and, secondly, being fully subjected to God.

By creating human beings and putting them in a situation where they choose between good and evil, God assumed the responsibility for their further destiny. God did not leave man face to face with the devil, but Himself entered into the struggle for humanity's spiritual survival. To this end, He sent prophets and teachers and then He Himself became man, suffered on the cross and died, descended into Hades and was raised from the dead in order to share human fate. By descending into Hades, Christ did not destroy the devil as a personal, living creature, but 'abolished the power of the devil', that is, deprived the devil of authority and power stolen by him from God. When he rebelled against God, the devil set himself the task to create his own autonomous kingdom where he would be master and where he would win back from God a space where God's presence could be in no way felt. In Old Testament understanding, this place was sheol. After Christ, sheol became a place of divine presence.

This presence is felt by all those in paradise as a source of joy and bliss, but for those in hell it is a source of suffering. Hell, after Christ, is no longer the place where the devil reigns and people suffer, but first and foremost it is the prison for the devil himself as well as for those who voluntarily decided to stay with him and share his fate. The sting of death was abolished by Christ and the walls of hell were destroyed. But 'death even without its sting is still powerful for us... Hell with its walls destroyed and its gates abolished is still filled with those who, having left the narrow royal path of the cross leading to paradise, follow the broad way all their lives'<sup>[62]</sup> .

Christ descended into hell not as another victim of the devil, but as Conqueror. He descended in order to 'bind up the powerful' and to 'plunder his vessels'. According to patristic teaching, the devil did not recognize in Christ the incarnate God. He took Him for an ordinary man and, rising to the 'bait' of the flesh, swallowed the 'hook' of the Deity (the image used by Gregory of Nyssa). However, the presence of Christ in hell constituted the poison which began gradually to ruin hell from within (this image was used by the 4th-century Syrian author Jacob Aphrahat<sup>[63]</sup>). The final destruction of hell and the ultimate victory over the devil will happen during the Second Coming of Christ when 'the last enemy to be destroyed is death', when everything will be subjected to Christ and God will become 'all in all'<sup>[64]</sup> .

The doctrine of the descent of Christ into Hades is important for an understanding of God's action in human history, as reflected in the Old Testament. The biblical account of the flood, which destroyed all humanity, is a stumbling block for many who wish to believe in a merciful God but cannot reconcile themselves with a God who 'repents' of his own deed. The teaching on the descent into hell, as set forth in 1 Pet. 3:18-21, however, brings an entirely new perspective into our understanding of the mystery of salvation. It turns out that the death sentence passed by God to interrupt human life does not mean that human beings are deprived of hope for salvation, because, failing to turn to God during their lifetime, people could turn to Him in the afterlife having heard Christ's preaching in the prison of hell. While committing those He created to death, God did not destroy them, but merely transferred them to a different state in which they could hear the preaching of Christ, to believe and to follow Him.

#### 4. The soteriological implications of the doctrine of the descent into Hades

The doctrine on the descent of Christ into Hades is an integral part of Orthodox soteriology. Its soteriological implications, however, depend in many ways on the way in which we understand the preaching of Christ in hell and its salutary impact on people<sup>[65]</sup>. If the preaching was addressed only to the Old Testament righteous, then the soteriological implications of the doctrine is minimal, but if it was addressed to all those in hell, its significance is considerably increased. It seems that we have enough grounds to argue, following the Greek Orthodox theologian, I. Karmiris, that 'according to the teaching of almost all the Eastern Fathers, the preaching of the Saviour was extended to all without exception and salvation was offered to all the souls who passed away from the beginning of time, whether Jews or Greek, righteous or unrighteous'<sup>[66]</sup>. At the same time, the preaching of Christ in hell was good and joyful news of deliverance and salvation, not only for the righteous but also the unrighteous. It was not the preaching 'to condemn for unbelief and wickedness', as it seemed to Thomas Aquinas. The entire text of the First Letter of St. Peter relating to the preaching of Christ in hell speaks against its understanding in terms of accusation and damnation'<sup>[67]</sup>.

Whether all or only some responded to the call of Christ and were delivered from hell remains an open question. If we accept the point of view of those Western church writers who maintain that Christ delivered from hell only the Old Testament righteous, then Christ's salutary action is reduced merely to the restoration of justice. The Old Testament righteous suffered in hell undeservedly, not for their personal sins but because of the general sinfulness of human nature and because their deliverance from hell was a 'duty' which God was obliged to undertake with respect to them. But such an act could scarcely constitute a miracle that made the angels tremble or one to be praised in church hymns.

Unlike the West, Christian consciousness in the East admits the opportunity to be saved not only for those who believe during their lifetime, but also those who were not given to believe yet pleased God with their good works. The idea that salvation was not only for those who in life confessed the right

faith, not only for the Old Testament righteous, but also those heathens who distinguished themselves by a lofty morality, is developed in one of the hymns of John Damascene:

*Some say that [Christ delivered from hell] only those who believed<sup>[68]</sup>, such as fathers and prophets, judges and together with them kings, local rulers and some others from the Hebrew people, not numerous and known to all. But we shall reply to those who think so that there is nothing undeserved, nothing miraculous and nothing strange in that Christ should save those who believed<sup>[69]</sup>, for He remains only the fair Judge, and every one who believes in Him will not perish. So they all ought to have been saved and delivered from the bonds of hell by the descent of God and Master - that same happened by His Disposition. Whereas those who were saved only through [God's] love of men were, as I think, all those who had the purest life and did all kinds of good works, living in modesty, temperance and virtue, but the pure and divine faith they did not conceive because they were not instructed in it and remained altogether unlearned. They were those whom the Steward and Master of all drew, captured in the divine nets and persuaded to believe in Him, illuminating them with the divine rays and showing them the true light<sup>[70]</sup>.*

This approach renders the descent into Hades exceptional in its soteriological implications. According to Damascene, those who were not taught the true faith during their lifetime can come to believe when in hell. By their good works, abstention and chastity they prepared themselves for the encounter with Christ. These are that same people about whom St. Paul says that having no law they 'do by nature things contained in the law', for 'the work of the law is written in their hearts'<sup>[71]</sup>. Those who live by the law of natural morality but do not share the true faith can hope by virtue of their righteousness that in a face-to-face encounter with God they will recognize in Him the One they 'ignorantly worshipped'<sup>[72]</sup>.

Has this anything to do with those who died outside Christian faith after the descent of Christ into Hades? No, if we accept the Western teaching that the descent into Hades was a 'one-time' event and that the recollection of Christ did not survive in hell. Yes, if we proceed from the assumption that after Christ hell was no longer like the Old Testament sheol, but it became a place of the divine presence. In addition, as Archpriest Serge Bulgakov writes, 'all events in the life of Christ, which happen in time, have timeless, abiding significance. Therefore, the so-called 'preaching in hell', which is the faith of the Church, is a revelation of Christ to those who in their earthly life could not see or know Christ. There are no grounds for limiting this event... to the Old Testament saints alone, as Catholic theology does. Rather, the power of this preaching should be extended to all time for those who during their life on earth did not and could not know Christ but meet Him in the afterlife<sup>[73]</sup>. According to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, all the dead, whether believers or non-believers, appear before God. Therefore, even for those who did not believe during their lifetime, there is hope that they will recognize God as their Saviour and Redeemer if their previous life on earth led them to this recognition.

The above hymn of John Damascene clearly states that the virtuous heathens were not 'taught' the true faith. This is a clear allusion to the words of Christ: 'Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'<sup>[74]</sup>; and 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but that believeth not shall be damned'<sup>[75]</sup>. The damnation is extended only to those who were taught Christian faith but did not believe. But if a person was not taught, if he in his real life did not encounter the preaching of the Gospel and did not have an opportunity to respond to it, can he be damned for it? We come back to the question that had disturbed such ancient authors as Clement of Alexandria.

Is it possible at all that the fate of a person can be changed after his death? Is death that border beyond which some unchangeable static existence comes? Does the development of the human person not stop after death?

On the one hand, it is impossible for one to actively repent in hell; it is impossible to rectify the evil deeds one committed by appropriate good works. However, it may be possible for one to repent through a 'change of heart', a review of one's values. One of the testimonies to this is the rich man of the Gospel we have already mentioned. He realized the gravity of his situation as soon as found himself in hell.

Indeed, if in his lifetime he was focused on earthly pursuits and forgot God, once in hell he realized that his only hope for salvation was God<sup>[76]</sup>. Besides, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, the fate of a person after death can be changed through the prayer of the Church. Thus, existence after death has its own dynamics. On the basis of what has been said above, we may say that after death the development of the human person does not cease, for existence after death is not a transfer from a dynamic into a static being, but rather continuation on a new level of that road which a person followed in his lifetime.

As the last stage in the divine descent (*katabasis*) and self-emptying (*kenosis*), the descent of Christ into Hades became at the same time the starting point of the ascent of humanity towards deification (*theosis*)<sup>[77]</sup>. Since this descent the path to paradise is opened for both the living and the dead, which was followed by those whom Christ delivered from hell. The destination point for all humanity and every individual is the fullness of deification in which God becomes ‘all in all’<sup>[78]</sup>. It is for this deification that God first created man and then, when ‘the time had fully come’ (Gal. 4:4), Himself became man, suffered, died, descended to Hades and was raised from the dead.

We do not know if every one followed Christ when He rose from hell. Nor do we know if every one will follow Him to the eschatological Heavenly Kingdom when He will become ‘all in all’. But we do know that since the descent of Christ into Hades the way to resurrection has been opened for ‘all flesh’, salvation has been granted to every human being, and the gates of paradise have been opened for all those who wish to enter through them. This is the faith of the Early Church inherited from the first generation of Christians and cherished by Orthodox Tradition. This is the never-extinguished hope of all those who believe in Christ Who once and for all conquered death, destroyed hell and granted resurrection to the entire human race.

[1] In particular, the image of the risen Christ coming out of the grave and holding a victory banner, borrowed from the Western tradition.

[2] 1 Pet. 3:18—21.

[3] The critical edition of ‘Stromateis’: Clemens Alexandrinus. Band II: Stromateis I—VI. Hrsg. von O. Stählin, L. Früchtel, U. Treu. Berlin—Leipzig 1960; Band III: Stromateis VII—VIII. Hrsg. von O. Stählin. GCS 17. Berlin—Leipzig, 1970. S. 3-102.

[4] That is those who came to believe while in hell.

[5] Stromateis 6, 6.

[6] Rom. 3:29; 10:12.

[7] Stromateis 6, 6.

[8] Stromateis 6, 6.

[9] Stromateis 6, 6.

[10] In the East it was developed by Gregory of Nyssa and Isaac the Syrian. In the West it gradually led to the formation of the doctrine on purgatory.

[11] The Great Catechetical Oration 23?24.

[12] The Homily on the Three-Day Period (pp. 444?446). The text of the sermon in: Gregoriou Nyssis hapanta ta erga. T. 10. Hellenes pateres tes ekklesias 103. Thessalonike, 1990. Sel. 444—487. Since in this edition the text is not divided into chapters, we indicate page numbers.

[13] Cf. Mt. 12:40.

[14] Lit. ‘to make a fool of somebody’ (from *moros*—fool)

[15] The Homily on the Three-Day Period (pp. 452?454).

[16] The Homily on the Three-Day Period (pp. 452?454). Cf. 1 Cor. 15:26.

[17] Spiritual Homilies 11, 11?13.

- [18] Cf. Mt. 5:45.
- [19] 7th Paschal Homily 2 (PG 77, 552 A).
- [20] Cf. 1 Pet. 3:19-20.
- [21] Is. 49:9.
- [22] 2nd Festive Letter 8, 52-89 (SC 372, 228-232)
- [23] Cf. Mt. 5:45. See the same comparison in 'Spiritual Homilies' by Macarius of Egypt.
- [24] See above quotations from these authors
- [25] 5th Festive Letter 1, 29-40 (SC 732, 284).
- [26] 1 Pet. 4:6.
- [27] Questions-answers to Thalassius 7.
- [28] Is. 9:2.
- [29] Lk. 4:18-19; Cf. Is. 61:1-2.
- [30] Phil. 2:10.
- [31] The Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith 3, 29.
- [32] 1 Cor. 15:28.
- [33] Maximus the Confessor, Questions-answers to Thalassius 59. More on this teaching see in J. C. Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme selon Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris, 1996), pp. 647-652.
- [34] Rev. 3:20.
- [35] Rom. 8:29-30.
- [36] See John Calvin, *Instruction in Christian Faith*, V. II, Book III ('Concerning the pre-eternal election whereby God predestined some for salvation while others for condemnation').
- [37] 16th Discourse on the Epistle to the Romans.
- [38] Concerning the teaching on the descent of Christ into Hades in the flesh, see: I. N. Karmires, 'He Christologike heterodidaskalia tou 16 aionos kai eis hadou kathodos tou Christou', *Nea Sion* 30 (1935). Sel. 11—26, 65—81, 154—165. See also: S. Der Nersessian. 'An Armenian Version of the Homilies on the Harrowing of Hell', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954), pp. 201-224.
- [39] Letter 164, II, 3 (PL 33, 709).
- [40] Letter 164, II, 3 (PL 33, 710).
- [41] Letter 164, II, 3 (PL 33, 710).
- [42] Cf. J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell* (Edinburgh, 1930), p. 123.
- [43] Cf. Acts 2:24.
- [44] That is, the pains of hell.
- [45] Letter 164, II, 5 (PL 33, 710-711).
- [46] Lk. 23:43.
- [47] Letter 164, III, 7-8 (PL 33, 710-711).
- [48] Acts 2:29.
- [49] Letter 164, III, 7-8 (PL 33, 711).
- [50] Letter 164, III, 10-13 (PL 33, 713-714). Elsewhere Augustine describes as heresy the teaching that non-believers could

come to believe in hell and that Christ led everybody out of hell: See, On Heresies 79 (PL 42, 4).

[51] Letter 164, IV, 15?16 (PL 33, 715).

[52] See below.

[53] See details in: F. Loofs. 'Descent to Hades', Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (New York, 1912), vol. IV, p. 658.

[54] Summa theologiae IIIa, 52, 2 (St Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae. Latin text with English translation. London — New York, 1965. Vol. 54. P. 158).

[55] Summa theologiae IIIa, 52, 5 (Summa theologiae. Vol. 54, pp. 166?170).

[56] Summa theologiae IIIa, 52, 6 (Summa theologiae. Vol. 54, pp. 170?1720).

[57] Summa theologiae IIIa, 52, 7 (Summa theologiae. Vol. 54, pp. 174?176).

[58] Summa theologiae IIIa, 52, 8 (Summa theologiae. Vol. 54, pp. 176?178).

[59] See for instance: H. U. von Balthasar et A. Grillmeier, Le mystère pascal (Paris, 1972), p. 170 (where the Thomistic understanding of the descent to Hades is described as 'bad theology').

[60] The teaching on the fate of unbaptised infants, contained in the work 'Concerning Infants Who Have Died Prematurely' by Gregory Palamas, is opposite to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas.

[61] The term 'theodicy' (literally 'the justification of God') was invented by Leibnitz in the early 18th century.

[62] Innocent, Archbishop of Cherson and Tauria, Works, vol. V (St-Petersburg—Moscow, 1870), p. 289 (Homily at Holy Saturday).

[63] Demonstration 22, 4—5 in The Homilies of Aphraates, the Persian Sage, ed. by W. Wright (London—Edinburgh, 1869), pp. 420—421.

[64] 1 Cor. 15:26—28.

[65] Cf. I. N. Karmires, He eis hadou kathodos Iesou Christou (Athenai, 1939), sel. 107.

[66] Ibid., p. 119.

[67] Bishop Gregory (Yaroshevsky), An Interpretation of the Most Difficult Passages in the First Letter of St Peter (Simferopol, 1902), p. 10.

[68] That is those who believed in their lifetime.

[69] That is those who believed during their life on earth.

Concerning Those Who Died in Faith (PG 95, 257 AC).

[71] Rom. 2:14?15.

[72] Acts 17:23.

[73] Serge Bulgakov, Agnets Bozhiy [The Lamb of God] (Moscow, 2000), p. 394.

[74] Mt. 28:19.

[75] Mk. 16:16.

[76] Lk. 16:20—31.

[77] Cf. J. Daniélou, The Theology of Jewish Christianity (London, s.a.), p. 233—234.

[78] 1 Cor. 15:28

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