

Dangers of Eschatological Speculation

The Gnostic Nature of the Toll-House Theory

Reader Alexander Vallens

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Introduction

The mystery of the fate of the soul after death is often a topic of great interest to clergy, faithful and nonbelievers alike, because, naturally, each person is curious to know what will happen to him once he dies. This subject, however, remains a great mystery to us, largely because the soul is incorporeal, and thus cannot be observed by man or detected by machine. Even with the great technological advances of the modern era, science cannot conclusively state whether the soul exists or not, much less determine what happens to it apart from the body. The Church, also, is left to ponder these many details, since little has been revealed about the afterlife aside from descriptions of the General Resurrection and Final Judgment at the Second Coming of Our Lord. What happens to the soul when it is separated from the body? Where does it go, what does it do, what does it feel, what does it think? In an attempt to answer these questions, some speculations by Orthodox writers have been made in recent years, particularly in response to the modern accounts of “near-death experiences” by people who have been revived after being declared clinically dead for as long as a few hours.¹ However, nearly all such theories have not received universal, nor even prevailing, acceptance by hierarchs and theologians. This study will briefly review a one of these speculations, the theory of taxation of souls, and attempt to evaluate its validity from the perspective of Orthodox Tradition.

The Intermediate State of Souls

From Holy Scripture we know that death is the separation of the soul from the body,² a consequence of sin,³ and we know of the reunion of body and soul, called the resurrection of the dead,⁴ which is to take place at Our Lord’s Second and Glorious Coming⁵ and be followed by the Final Judgment.⁶ However, the interim state of the soul between death and resurrection is not described in great detail, rather only alluded to, as in Our Lord’s Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.⁷ From this and like descriptions has come the general conclusion that the soul, separated from the body, abides in a place appropriate for it:

The Place of Comfort is the place where the souls of the good and devout go. The Place of Torment is the place where the souls of the evil and impious are held... However, the kind and amount of reward for the

¹ Cf. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose, *The Soul After Death* (Platina, 1980).

² Matthew 10:28

³ Romans 6:23

⁴ Mat. 22:31-32

⁵ Mark 13:26

⁶ Mat. 25:31-46

⁷ Luke 16:19-31

good souls in Hades, as well as the kind and amount of punishment for the evil souls is temporary. The full reward or punishment will be given to the good and evil souls at the Second Coming of Christ.⁸

Since most sources appear to be in agreement over this aspect of the intermediate state, this interpretation needs no further examination here. However, the nature of the “Particular Judgment”⁹ that leads to this state has been the topic of varying speculation and debate by Orthodox theologians. Most notably, the theory of taxation of souls is at the forefront of controversy, since it presents a radically altered understanding of God’s mercy and role in judgment. The aerial toll-house theory, as it is called, is summarized by the Hieromonk Seraphim Rose in his book, *The Soul After Death*, quoting “a 19th-century Russian Orthodox Father, Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov”:¹⁰

“For the testing of souls as they pass through the spaces of the air there have been established by the dark powers separate judgment places and guards in a remarkable order. In the layers of the under-heaven, from earth to heaven itself, stand guarding legions of fallen spirits. Each division is in charge of a special form of sin and tests the soul in it when the soul reaches this division. The aerial demonic guards and judgment places are called in the Patristic writings the *toll-houses*, and the spirits who serve in them are called the tax-collectors” (Bishop Ignatius, *Collected Works*, vol. III, p.136).¹¹

From this definition, and from Fr. Seraphim’s supporting evidence, one is led to believe that the “tax-collectors,” the demons which serve in the toll-houses, have a clear power to “snatch” the soul into the Place of Torment, which suggests that the demons are the ones who actually pass judgment on the soul, not God, as proclaimed in Scripture.¹² In *Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave*, Archimandrite Panteleimon argues:

“This particular judgment of God over the souls that have left their bodies follows upon the trials of these souls. The Orthodox Church teaches that, during such trials, the departed souls rise from earth through great expanse of the air, or sky, and that, while angels accompany them, the evil spirits detain them and accuse them of all the sins which they have committed during their lives.” (**Dogmatic Theology** of Bishop Anthony, in Russian, par. 341, 8th edition, 1862, p. 244)

For the purpose of this judgment, Divine Justice uses angels, both the holy and evil ones. The good angels note all the good deeds of a man while he is alive; the others note all his sins. When a soul begins to rise to heaven, the holy angels lead it, while the dark spirits accuse it of those its [sic.] sins which have not been atoned for by proper penitence. Through these sins the evil spirits seem to make the soul a victim of Satan, for sins are marks of the soul’s communion with evil and of its eternal fate, common for evil angels and evil human souls.

The powers of darkness have established particular seats of judgment and particular watches, and through

⁸ Athenagoras Cavadas, *The World Beyond the Grave or the After Life* (Brookline, 1988), pp. 41, 42.

⁹ Constantine Cavarnos, *The Future Life According to Orthodox Teaching*, trans. Hieromonk Auxentios & Archimandrite Chrysostomos (Etna, 1985), p. 23.

¹⁰ Rose, p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 75.

¹² Cf. John 5:22,26-27, Acts 10:42.

these the souls pass and are tried during their rise through the air. Throughout the space between earth and heaven there watchfully stand contingents of the fallen spirits. Each contingent has under its surveillance a particular kind of sins, [sic.] and tries the soul when it reaches that stage. In the writings of the fathers of the Church, the watches of demons in the air and their seats of judgment are called “trials” and the spirits that serve there are the “triers.”¹³

This assertion that Christ the Judge, “Who thus, remaining unseen, judges human souls *through* His angels,”¹⁴ delegates the act of judgment to angels and demons contradicts the Biblical notion of a single Judge¹⁵ surrounded by “an innumerable company of angels.”¹⁶ Instead, Holy Scripture proclaims the precise opposite, that man shall judge angles.¹⁷ Lacking in Biblical support, advocates of the toll-house theory point to visions and extraordinary testimonies of both patristic and contemporary sources. The most notable of these is the vision of Gregory, disciple to St. Basil the New, who “in his vision learned about the hour of death and the passing through torments of a woman known as the blessed Theodora.”¹⁸ This account remains the only evidence of the taxing of souls given in any great detail. However, proponents of this view point to other patristic sources, interpreting accounts of demonic attacks and temptation as evidence supporting their premise. One such account is that of St. Anthony the Great, great ascetic and Father of monasticism:

When he once had a discussion with certain men who had come to him concerning the state of the soul and of what nature its place will be after this life, the following night one from above called him, saying, ‘Antony, rise, go out and look.’ Having gone out therefore (for he knew whom he ought to obey) looking up, he beheld one standing and reaching to the clouds, tall, hideous, and fearful, and others ascending as though they were winged. And the figure stretched forth his hands, and some of those who were ascending were stayed by him, while others flew above, and having escaped heaven-ward, were borne aloft free from care. At such, therefore, the giant gnashed his teeth, but rejoiced over those who fell back. And forthwith a voice came to Antony, ‘Understandest thou what thou seest?’ And his understanding was opened, and he understood that it was the passing of souls, and that the tall being who stood was the enemy who envies the faithful. And those whom he caught and stopped from passing through are accountable to him, while those whom he was unable to hold as they passed upwards had not been subservient to him. So having seen this, and as it were being reminded, he struggled the more daily to advance towards those things which were before.¹⁹

Nowhere in this story is any reference made to toll-houses or taxing of souls, rather only the release of those unworthy to the guardian of the Place of Torment. Nevertheless, it is repeatedly referred to as

¹³ Archimandrite Panteleimon, *Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave* (Jordanville, 1989), pp. 61-62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62, my emphasis.

¹⁵ James 5:9, 1 Peter 4:5

¹⁶ Hebrews 12:23

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:9

¹⁸ Panteleimon, p. 69.

¹⁹ St. Athanasius the Great, *Life of St. Antony* in Archibald Robertson, ed. *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, 2 NPNF IV (Peabody, 1999), pp. 213-214.

an authoritative affirmation of this theory.²⁰ Many other patristic references are likewise given in defense of the toll-house concept, however most are similarly ambiguous. Without Scriptural and unanimous concrete patristic support, the theory of the taxation of souls is not, as Fr. Seraphim Rose put it in the preface to his work, “the teaching which the Orthodox Church of Christ has handed down from her very beginning, which is expressed in countless Patristic writings and lives of Saints and in the Divine services of the Orthodox Church, and which has been taught uninterruptedly in the Church even down to our own day.”²¹ Rather, it becomes, at best, an eschatological speculation made by Orthodox theologians.

Role of Eschatological Speculation

Speculation about the intermediate state of souls has led, as shown above, to a rather dubious theory. However, the precarious conclusion alone is not to blame, but rather the arrogant desire to understand the hidden; man, the created, wishes to know and understand something which God, the Creator, has chosen not to reveal. This is nothing new to man, but rather is the very nature of his first transgression:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die...” Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked;²²

²⁰ Cf. Nikolaos P. Vassiliadis. *The Mystery of Death* (Athens, 1997), p. 387, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos. *Life after Death*, trans. Esther Williams (Levadia, 1996), p. 71, Cavarnos pp. 26-28, and Panteleimon, p. 62. Fr. Seraphim Rose instead refers to the previous paragraph in the *Life of St. Anthony*:

For once, when about to eat, having risen up to pray about the ninth hour, he perceived that he was caught up in the spirit, and, wonderful to tell, he stood and saw himself, as it were, from outside himself, and that he was led in the air by certain ones. Next certain bitter and terrible beings stood in the air and wished to hinder him from passing through. But when his conductors opposed them, they demanded whether he was not accountable to them. And when they wished to sum up the account from his birth, Antony's conductors stopped them, saying, 'The Lord hath wiped out the sins from his birth, but from the time he became a monk, and devoted himself to God, it is permitted you to make a reckoning.' Then when they accused him and could not convict him, his way was free and unhindered. And immediately he saw himself, as it were, coming and standing by himself, and again he was Antony as before. Then forgetful of eating, he remained the rest of the day and through the whole of the night groaning and praying. (2 NPNF IV, p. 213)

This clearly was a vision that St. Anthony experienced while alive and could be symbolic of any spiritual struggle. Once again, this does not, in fact, indicate a patristic affirmation of toll-houses as surmised by Fr. Seraphim, who prefaced this story with “Bishop Ignatius quotes many Holy Fathers who teach concerning the toll-houses.” (Rose, p. 79)

²¹ Rose, p. 2.

²² Genesis 2:16-17, 3:1-7

Thus, we see that the desire to delve into the unknown is obviously part of “human nature,” as it is called in modern terminology. Although the appetite for knowledge should not be considered bad in and of itself, a seeker venturing where he does not belong can bring himself into a dangerous position, without him even knowing what impending threat lies ahead. This was the case for Adam and Eve, although they were warned ahead of time, and likewise is the case in any number of situations, such as a curious child reaching for a pot of boiling water to see what is inside. As mentioned before, God chose not to reveal the details of the intermediate state of the soul in Scripture, and therefore speculation about such should be avoided, lest we act in pride as our ancestors did so long ago. St. Andrew of Crete testifies to this, as quoted by Archbishop Lazar (Puhalo) in his work *The Soul, the Body, and Death*:

But do not investigate the state of the soul after its departure from the body, because it is not for you or me to know this. For, if we are unable to know the essence of the soul, how should we understand its repose.²³

Likewise, the archbishop also quotes St. Athanasius of Sinai in the prologue to his work:

Regarding those things which are passed over in silence in the Divine Scripture, it is manifest that they must not be sought out. The Holy Spirit revealed to us those things which it is to our profit to learn, and again as for those things which are not profitable, He kept them hidden.²⁴

Our holy father among the saints, John Chrysostom, also warns against such speculation, but notably also warns us about trusting visions of the afterlife:

Let us not, therefore, seek to hear from dead men what the Scriptures teach us much more clearly every day. For if God knew that resurrected dead men could be of profit to the living then He – Who brings to pass all things for our benefit – would not have neglected or let pass (the opportunity to give us) such gain. But besides this, if dead men were to be raised up continuously to proclaim to us all things that are yonder, then in time this also would be set at naught and, moreover, the devil could introduce wicked doctrines with much ease. For he could often show forth apparitions, or even further, he could contrive that certain men should seem to die ... and then he could show them as being risen from the dead, and by means of these men he could persuade the minds of the deluded of whatsoever he wished... But God, foreseeing all this ... does not permit that any man should ever come from thence and speak to the living about the things yonder, and hereby He teaches us to hold the Divine Scripture to be more worthy of credence than anything else.²⁵

The proponents of the toll-house theory thus engage in a speculation specifically condemned by patristic sources. This eschatological guesswork has led them, lacking clear Scriptural support for their hypothesis, to contrived interpretations of Scripture and patristic writings in defense of their position. Such “reading between the lines,” as it were, is an attribute of Gnosticism, the earliest of Christian

²³ Archbishop Lazar (Puhalo). *The Soul, the Body and Death* (Dewdney, 1996), p. 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁵ Archbishop Lazar (Puhalo). *The Tale of Elder Basil “The New” and the Theodora Myth* (Dewdney, 1999), p. 24

heresies. It has been surmised that the toll-house theory is, in fact, a Gnostic heresy, a supposition that we shall examine now.

Gnosticism in the Toll-House Theory

Archbishop Lazar in his numerous spirited works against the toll-house theory has proclaimed it to be a Gnostic heresy. Unfortunately, his writing style can, at times, be filled with blunt accusations made without immediate justification, as demonstrated by his condemnation of “Rose Gnosticism”:²⁶

The neo-Gnostic philosopher Fr Seraphim Rose presented much the same system as all the Gnostic cults that preceded his own, basing himself largely on the Bogomil *Tale of Basil the New*. The Sect of the Synodites, also known as The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, with its open espousal of heretical dualistic anthropology (already condemned by the Orthodox Church) has been largely responsible for the continuation of this Gnostic mythology among Orthodox Christians in North America, producing one of the most notable and ludicrous of current Gnostic documents, a peculiar book called, in typical Gnostic terms, *Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave*, as notable for its stillness as for its theosophy and Gnosticism.²⁷

Nevertheless, Archbishop Lazar’s work appears to be the most extensive and theologically reasonable study of the toll-house theory.²⁸ To better understand how the premise of the taxation of souls is Gnostic, let us define Gnosticism:

One of the most potent forces operating in the Church’s environment, particularly in the second and third centuries, was Gnosticism. This is the name (from $\square\square\square\square$ = knowledge) applied to an amorphous group of sects or schools of thought about which theologians like Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hipolytus inform us. They treat it simply as a Christian heresy, and aberration brought about by the adulteration of sound apostolic doctrine with pagan philosophy, or even astrology and Greek mystery religions, and charge Simon Magus mentioned in Acts 8 with having originated it.²⁹

Just as there have been many different pagan religions and philosophical systems to influence the Christians, likewise there have been many different forms of Gnosticism within Christianity. A concept common to most Gnostic systems has been a sense of dualism, a “theological system which would explain the universe as the outcome of two eternally opposed and coexisting principles, conceived as good and evil, light and darkness, or some other form of conflicting powers.”³⁰ Such an assumption leads to the conjecture that God, Who is All-Good, All-Merciful and created all things, must have

²⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 10-11. Such petulant criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia might be a result of some personal feud the archbishop might have with his former jurisdiction. I mention this here only to acknowledge an apparent bias and obvious lack of tact in the archbishop’s work.

²⁸ In addition to his two books already mentioned, Archbishop Lazar maintains a website addressing this particular issue: *Regarding the Toll Houses* <www.new-ostrog.org/toll_main.html>.

²⁹ J. N. D. Kelly. *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, 1978), p. 22.

³⁰ *Dualism*, The Catholic Encyclopedia <www.newadvent.org/cathen/05169a.htm>.

created evil also. Conclusions of this sort, very Platonic in nature, have been condemned by the Church repeatedly, as in the case of Origen, anathematized posthumously by the 5th Ecumenical Council. The taxation of souls, especially the payment of the toll with good deeds to balance sins, is dualistic in nature. Likewise, dualistic language is used to describe the journey:

At that time the soul undergoes a detailed and thorough examination by the demons since an invisible but relentless warfare is waged between the good and the evil angels for the soul's possession.³¹

The Gnostic nature of the toll-house theory is most clearly evident from its similarity to other Gnostic accounts of the soul's departure from the body. Archbishop Lazar describes several variants of this story in his work against the toll-house theory.³² For example, he recounts the "*telonia*" myth in Mandaean Gnosticism:

Unlike Manicheism,³³ Mandaean Gnosticism did not originate in early pseudo-Christian Gnostic sects, but appears to predate them... Mandaean Gnosticism taught that the soul of man is imprisoned in the body and that death, though a dreadful, torturous experience, liberated the soul from the physical body. Despite this "liberation" the soul commenced a long and perilous journey through the astral planes. The soul, the Gnostics believe, must pass through a series of "gate houses" (*telonia*) – seven, one for each of the Babylonian "astral planes" or planetary spheres, and sometimes an eighth one named for the demon Rukha. At each of these *telonia* or tollgates, an archon (evil spirit) sought to detain the soul and prevent it from rising to the "region of light." At each gate, there was a trial and the archons, if they had sufficient evidence against the soul, or if the soul did not know the proper passwords or incantations, could cast the soul into hell. Even if the soul, being a faithful Mandaean, knew the magic formula it would have to face the trial in which its good works would be weighed on scales (the "*avathier*").³⁴

The archbishop gives, also, an historical account of Gnostic influence during the time of the Theodora vision,³⁵ as well as a description of its emergence in the Orthodox Church.³⁶ In essence, he believes "the tale of Elder Basil 'The New' (or 'The Younger')," which "takes place at a time when Gnostic dualism and eschatological fantasy were rampant in the empire,"³⁷ to be a fabrication of "Gregory and

³¹ Vassiliadis, p. 385.

³² *The Tale of Elder Basil "The New" and the Theodora Myth*, pp. 7-10.

³³ A religion founded by the Persian Mani in the latter half of the third century. It purported to be the true synthesis of all the religious systems then known, and actually consisted of Zoroastrian Dualism, Babylonian folklore, Buddhist ethics, and some small and superficial, additions of Christian elements. As the theory of two eternal principles, good and evil, is predominant in this fusion of ideas and gives color to the whole, Manichæism is classified as a form of religious Dualism. It spread with extraordinary rapidity in both East and West and maintained a sporadic and intermittent existence in the West (Africa, Spain, France, North Italy, the Balkans) for a thousand years, but it flourished mainly in the land of its birth, (Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Turkestan) and even further East in Northern India, Western China, and Tibet, where, c. A.D. 1000, the bulk of the population professed its tenets and where it died out at an uncertain date. (*Manichæism*, The Catholic Encyclopedia, <www.newadvent.org/cathen/09591a.htm>)

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-20. It should be noted that the account is included in common hagiography, including on the Orthodox Church in America's website: *December 30*, Feasts and Saints <www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/Feasts-and-Saints/December/Dec-30.html#6> & *March 26*, Feasts and Saints <www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/Feasts-and-Saints/March/Mar-26.html#5>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

his Elder Basil,” who “were Gnostic heretics, most likely Bogomils.”³⁸ Archbishop Lazar also questions whether Gregory or Theodora actually existed, but gives a brief account of each of their lives together with the Elder Basil’s.³⁹ In light of other evidence, the archbishop’s arguments, although controversial, seem to appear sound. However, since they are part of Church hagiography, one cannot simply dismiss these accounts as mere falsehood or heresy. What remains entirely evident, nevertheless, is the obvious Gnostic content in these stories, and in the language of toll-house theory as a whole.

Conclusion

The theory of taxation of souls can be considered, if nothing else, controversial. It clearly possesses Gnostic undertones, and appears to contradict Holy Scripture and teaching of Church Fathers. For this reason, it would not be unreasonable to consider it dubious. However, it would not be proper for a layperson to call something that has had minimal opposition by the episcopate outright heresy. Perhaps more study, or an official declaration by a council, might better resolve this debate. Regardless, since this is not a teaching directly addressed by Holy Scripture, and whereas it has had limited exposure in the life of the Church in the two millennia of her existence, perhaps it would be wisest to refrain from eschatological speculation and withhold a definite declaration about the theory altogether.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 24-25. Bogomils were members of Europe’s first great dualist church, which flourished in Bulgaria and the Balkans from the 10th to the 15th cent. Their creed, adapted from the Paulicians and modified by other Gnostic and Manichaean sources, is attributed to Theophilus or Bogomil, a Bulgarian priest of the 10th cent. The movement was intensely nationalistic and political, as well as religious, and reflected resentment of Byzantine culture, Slavic serfdom, and imperial authority. They vanished due to persecution and the expansion of Islam, but bits of their ideas and folklore persisted for centuries in Slavic lands. (*Bogomils*, The Columbia Encyclopedia, <www.bartleby.com/65/bo/Bogomils.html>)

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 20-23.

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