

From *Orthobro* to Orthodox and the Danger of Jay Dyer's church within the Church

By Noah Jefferson

My Circumstance and Motivation¹

My name is Noah Jefferson; I am a convert from Protestantism to holy Orthodoxy and hold a Master of Theological Studies with a Concentration in Orthodox and Eastern Christian Studies from Trinity College, University of Toronto. I am publishing this article only after receiving permission to do so from my Archbishop, parish priest and spiritual father.

My journey to Orthodoxy is likely very familiar in some ways: as a non-denominational Protestant I had become disillusioned and dissatisfied with my grab-basket theology, ahistorical understanding of Christianity, and especially my isolated, sectarian, non-catholic understanding of “the Church.” The awakening of my theological consciousness in my mid-teens-occurred during a brief stint of my family moving to a communal Protestant community, one of the reasons for this being to try and “live like the Church of Acts.” Needless to say, the experience was not a good one, and the community’s oppressive atmosphere only forced my needing to move from an unconscious to a reasoned faith, with the question of the Church as my primary focus. During my Bachelor of Theology degree program, I became convinced by Orthodoxy, that the Eastern Orthodox Church is the true Church and its faith the true faith, through my own research and the influence of an Orthodox friend of the family.

As I lived a rather isolated rural lifestyle having been homeschooled until college, my interaction with Orthodoxy was initially primarily digital. The sites Orthodoxinfo.com and Orthochristian.com were ones I especially looked to, their materials on Hieromartyr Hilarion Troitsky being influential in ingraining the inseparability of Christianity from the Church into my mind. However, I was motivated to seek out the Church in my “real life”, and so took trips to a wonderful Antiochian parish; however, due to the great travel distance, visits were necessarily infrequent, and no legitimate catechesis was possible. Thus, the internet continued to be my catechist for quite some time.

However, thankfully I was ultimately accepted as a catechumen in a wonderful Orthodox Church in America parish led by multiple priests who reflected the royal path of Orthodoxy without rigorism, and I was baptized approximately one year later. Also, after earning my Bachelor of Theology degree, I was accepted into the master’s program at the Orthodox School of Theology at Trinity College, University of Toronto, where I was primarily instructed by Orthodox Church in America Very Reverend Archpriest Dr. Geoffrey Ready, and Dr. Paul Ladouceur, the latter’s class on modern Orthodox theology introducing me to the thought of Fr. Georges Florovsky, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, Vladimir Lossky, and Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, being especially formative for me.

¹ In this recounting I will censor the names of various individuals and even of their specific Discord servers who wish to remain anonymous. However, I will still need to mention them for the sake of presenting the full context of these events and the danger of the cult that imposes itself upon the online Orthodox community and enforces shunning. I have not doxed anyone in this article, as all those named in this article are “public” personalities.

It is they, and my wonderful parish priests, who showed me what Orthodoxy should be, what theology is and how it should be conducted, and how a true ecclesiology must be ecumenical.

My formation by these influences however took time, as distance still only allowed relatively infrequent visits to my parish, and unfortunately on June 13, 2020, I learned of and joined the “Orthodox Christian” Discord server run by Jay Dyer, Father Deacon Ananias Sorem, and his moderator team, which came to include other online Orthodox influencers such as David Erhan.² At the beginning I was not part of this circle of course, as I was simply looking for interaction with other Orthodox who had the same love for theology as myself, and it appeared to me that I had found such. I soon made friends, and, as a right-wing leaning individual at the time, it was easy to acclimate to, and become desensitized to, the slurs and vulgarity used against those they considered degenerate, to identify with the theological views continually presented as Orthodox, and to adopt the same attitude towards the non-Orthodox as this “apologetics” community did. Of course, even when foolishly operating under a rigorist bent, and acting in a manner that while accepted and encouraged by the community, I am now ashamed of, I was still highly educated and sensitive to the right practice of theology, and so I was soon asked to join the moderator team for the server. Naively I accepted.

The fact is that these were people whose work I had been edified by and with that came an admiration, especially as they puffed me up and tried to move me towards establishing an online presence, though I never wanted such. I also thought of my being a moderator as helping to provide sound catechesis to inquirers and catechumens who would not receive such anywhere but online, as I had been told the general catechetical situation in North America was lacking for many of the inquirers on this server.

The above is not to say that my own motives were always pure, as I often engaged in debate online as a game, in mudslinging, and once even contributed to a scheme started by David Erhan of sending emails to a site started by the Reverend, Father Andrew Stephen Damick to elicit answers on difficult questions that could be used to undermine Fr. Damick’s website’s credibility in the eyes of inquirers. Keeping up to date on the latest online squabble and attacking whoever opposed Jay Dyer, David Erhan and “the server,” was how one got respect, and it really was an environment in which the influencers “groomed” subordinates such as I predatorially. Regardless, I am ashamed of my past behavior, glad to be free from such negative influences, and hope no one else is sucked into such an environment where this activity and mindset are encouraged.

Over time, as anyone with a shred of education and intellectual integrity quickly does, I increasingly became dissatisfied with the kinds and level of intellectual discussion one finds in online forums. It was then that the website PatristicFaith.com was being made, and in the discussions among the moderation team with Fr. Dcn. Ananias I excitedly wanted to make the site a theological journal, or at least a section of it, as I had heard academics I greatly respected, such as Dr. David Bradshaw would publish on the site. My recommendation went unheeded, and instead, the website became a place to collect the vitriolic articles or YouTube videos of online

² On Discord, like other social media platforms, one can create an account under their own name or remain anonymous. As the vast majority of users are anonymous and I had not joined with the intention of drawing any attention to myself, I made an anonymous profile with the name *Star Byzantium*.

influencers in Jay Dyer and Fr. Dcn. Ananias' "circle" as they call it, as well as anti-ecumenical, anti-Covid-measures, and apocalyptically charged writings of miscellaneous clergy.³ I feel I should note here that while Dr. Bradshaw has published on the site, I am not sure how aware he is of the site's workings, and I certainly do not mean to cast any aspersions on him whatsoever.

For myself, encouraged by a friend in the site's circle, I thought it would be good to use the sight to publish some personal articles and thereby develop a resume, especially as I was preparing to pursue my PhD in Orthodox theology in the future. I ended up allowing three article I wrote to be published on the site, one a florilegium on apostolic succession which was prompted by the questions of a friend who had left the Church (in hindsight I now believe such was a result of his retaining his Protestant mindset through contact with Father Peter Heers of OrthodoxEthos.com), another a brief apologetic article on the papacy, and the other a reflection on Pascha and the Resurrection through the theology of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae. At the time of writing the last article I had become disturbed by the reactionary attitude of the whole site and wanted to publish something quite different, something world affirming while not explicitly ecumenical as I knew an ecumenical article would almost assuredly be rejected by the circle. I was also rather alarmed by the decision to promote various individuals on the site, such as Roosh V, the former hedonistic pick-up artist whose articles consist of imposing a monastic lifestyle on laity, spouting apocalyptic, anti-semitic rhetoric and the like. I had been enlisted by Fr. Dcn. Ananias to be a pro bono quasi-editor on the site, and I soon simply stopped participating, giving the excuse that I was too busy or had not checked my email, so as to avoid helping publish articles I did not agree with. However, I now believe I should have spoken out, rather than merely avoided confrontation, even if such would have been unpleasant and subjected me to the wrath of the circle.

I am a bit of a naturally nervous person, socially awkward, and naïve, yet I had made friends, or so I thought, so for many months I had overlooked the distortion of Orthodoxy, not to mention neglect of common human decency and integrity, which I found around me. However, as is my way, my spirit came to a sort of boiling point, for lack of a better phrase, and I could no longer take it. The Orthodoxy I had learned in my education from the great theologians of the 20th century, in which the Orthodox theological tradition and identity was not in tension with, but was enriched by, ecumenism,⁴ was something I could not compromise or suppress for the short-sighted purposes of an online apologetics ring. However, as soon as I voiced my concerns, I quickly found out that

³PatristicFaith.com claims to be a "ministry," requests donations, and the money is given through Venmo, PayPal or Patreon. I never profited monetarily or otherwise from this site or from anyone involved, nor did I ever request to. It must also be noted that PatristicFaith.com is not under the oversight of any synod and is not connected to any official ecclesial structure.

⁴ Ecumenism summarized all too briefly, according to Fr. Georges Florovsky who was the chief mind behind 20th century Orthodox ecumenism, means the overcoming of schisms and divisions among Christians through return to the faith and sources of the undivided Church, reintegration of this legacy into our own confessional contexts, and through dialogue coming to greater understanding based on historical and theological study resulting in progress towards reunion without compromising the faith. See Fr. Matthew Baker, "Neopatristic Synthesis and Ecumenism: Toward the 'Reintegration' of Christian Tradition" *The Living Christ: The Theological Legacy of Georges Florovsky*. John Chryssavgis & Brandon Gallaher, eds (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2021), 189-219.

I was not part of a theological club in which free thought was tolerable, let alone in a group of friends; I was in a cult!

After expressing my views on the validity of sacraments outside the Church's canonical boundaries, I was quickly messaged with insults and threatened by David Erhan that I would be banned from the server if I continued to express my opinion, an opinion held by the majority of modern Orthodox theologians and hierarchs as well as expressed in councils. I was accused of "confusing" inquirers and was banned; however, my friend, who will remain nameless as I have no desire to see said friend doxed, harassed, or publicly attacked on social media by the circle, bargained for me to be readmitted as long as I would not talk about ecclesiology (the topic of most import to me). I accepted this and was readmitted to the server. Several weeks later however, after what I believe should have been an innocent disagreement with Jay Dyer over whether passive-potency could be ascribed to God (which I of course denied, yet Dyer affirmed) turned ugly, I was banned again with a string of the most vulgar insults ringing in my ears. Finally, after being readmitted once again after agreeing not to say anything about the verbal abuse I had received, this time as a mere member rather than as a moderator which they once again asked me to be but which I refused, I was banned permanently for expressing my ecclesiological views which I had thought allowable since I was no longer a moderator and part of their circle. If this was all that had occurred, I would not have felt so compelled to write this article, however things would escalate even further.

As there are multiple smaller Orthodox servers on Discord, I joined a few, because, as a young man in the 21st century living relatively isolated, my interaction with those having similar interests happens mostly online, and I had been shunned by most everyone from Jay Dyer's Orthodox Christian Discord server. In short time I was also banned from the server called "Kursk Root Lodge," which counts Father John Whiteford as one of its online clergy members, because I would not agree with the claim that the Orthodox hierarchy is corrupted by the spirit of antichrist and that ecumenism is the pan-heresy. Likewise, shortly after my banning from Jay Dyer's server, Fr. Whiteford, in conjunction with David Erhan, released a video on YouTube⁵ regarding the issue of heterodox sacraments, promoting the rigorist ecclesiology.

However, on yet another server I was able to find Orthodox of like-mind, who respected the hierarchy and were formed by interaction with the work of our best theologians rather than online influencers and the third hand sayings of Elder Whosit from the Skete of St. Whatsit. I expressed my views freely there and at the same time I emailed the editor of *Patristic Faith* to request the unpublishing of my articles from their site as I no longer wanted to have any association with their "ministry" whatsoever. However, instead of simply removing my articles, articles that are owned by me and not *Patristic Faith*, after receiving my request, *Patristic Faith* editor Chase Mudd asked why I was requesting such, and I answered honestly but in hindsight perhaps foolishly, with the following:

To put it bluntly, besides the ill-treatment I have received from several affiliated with this site on another platform, I do not agree with the version of Orthodoxy it pushes: a mixture

⁵ David Erhan. [@therealMedWhite]. (2023, January 4). Baptism and the Reception of Converts w/ Fr. John Whiteford [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/live/hX0nftUclUY?feature=share>

of radical right wing politics, sectarian ecclesiology, eschatological frenzy, and an evangelical fundie mindset transposed onto Orthodoxy, presenting online cults of personality under the guise of traditionalism, and whose only use for theology is as ballistics against ‘the other.’ I do not believe the views continually expressed on this site are representative of the Orthodox hierarchy or the best theologians of our time, let alone the ancient fathers, nor is any serious theology being or going to be done here. Consequently, I have no desire to have my name associated with this platform.

My above email was sent privately to *Patristic Faith* editor Chase Mudd on January 29, 2023, in order to have my articles, which are my property, removed from the PatristicFaith.com website. However, after a week, my email still had not been answered, and due to what transpired next, I assume my private request to the editor was circulated among the “clergy board,”⁶ which supposedly runs the site according to Fr. Dcn. Ananias Sorem, until it was given to Jay Dyer, who, on February 6, 2023, entered the Discord server I was now a member of and doxed⁷ my real name for all to see while also labeling me a “gay Fordhamite,” no doubt in the spirit of so-called patristic rhetoric.⁸

After the above interaction, Jay Dyer messaged me privately with more insults and the threat that he would dox me far more publicly, by stating:

You decided to become a weasel and passive aggressively subvert, you’re a scumbag, and I will publicly livestream and discuss your email and who you are, or you can leave us and me out of your bullshit.

The owner of the server I was frequenting, who shall remain nameless, as I have no desire to see said owner doxed, harassed, or publicly attacked on social media by Jay Dyer or his circle, then messaged me and said that Jay Dyer threatened him in the past as well. In further discussion he

⁶ Prior to these events, while still a moderator on Jay Dyer’s “Orthodox Christian” Discord server, I personally witnessed this same “clergy board”, through Fr. Dcn. Ananias, had cautioned Abbot Tryphon, a “senior contributor” to *Patristic Faith* after his severance from *Ancient Faith Radio*, that he would have to censor his own ecumenical beliefs as they were “heretical” according to the *Patristic Faith* standard, when in fact Abbot Tryphon had expressed opinions completely within the bounds of Orthodoxy and expressed in official ecumenical agreements. Of course, the real issue is not the correctness of this or that belief, but the fact that a group of priests and charismatic laymen are acting independently to censor others in the name of Orthodoxy, using cyber-cult-like tactics including dox threats.

⁷ To “dox” is to publish private or identifying information of someone without their consent, typically with malicious intent. In this case, Jay Dyer, perhaps with the consent of the “clergy board” running *Patristic Faith*, doxed me on the new Discord server I was participating in, and threatened to further and far more publicly attack me by releasing my name, private email, and whatever other information he had about me via a public video inviting his online followers to continue digitally abusing me, to secure my silence.

⁸ It is regularly claimed by this group of online influencers that the vilest rhetoric is permissible to be used against one’s opponents, whether non-Orthodox or even Orthodox who do not meet their standards. Anyone that disagrees with such vulgar behavior is called a “piety signaller,” and the moderators may even ban people for such so-called piety signalling. This is done to (a) protect the influencers from any criticism, and (b) preserve the cultic atmosphere of their community.

relayed that Jay Dyer and his cronies act like a mafia over the online Orthodox community, and that another online apologist, who will also remain nameless, whose academic credentials, theological knowledge, and ecumenical approach I cannot praise highly enough, has had to censor his own content dealing with ecumenism because he unfortunately is very reliant on Jay Dyer's circle for monetary revenue and does not wish to become the new target of their cyber gang.⁹

The above said, while I am not a naturally confrontational person and always desire to live and peace with all men if possible, I simply feel it morally incumbent upon me to make this situation public and bring attention to the great danger threatening the new wave of converts to Orthodoxy that could poison the well of the North American Church for generations to come. If I did not feel morally called to do so, as well as ashamed of my own prior engagement with these people, I would simply be privately repulsed by the idea of my association with these theological hacks who pollute the name of apologetics, and worse blaspheme Christ by how they represent Him. However, since I sincerely believe they are a significant danger to Orthodoxy, I feel compelled to go public with this information, rather than be merely privately repulsed. I also sincerely believe the aforementioned dangerous individuals and groups should be examined and taken very seriously by the hierarchy, therefore, I will endeavor to prove and to explain such below.

The Virtual Church and its Inner Circle

What is this online environment? It is virtual so it is not real; what danger could come from there? Sadly, the above may be the view of many in the Church hierarchy when it comes to the new digital age we all find ourselves in, and such a view is undoubtedly dangerous to hold, as it is common knowledge that schismatics and rigorists have not only been able to successfully disseminate their ideas through the internet, especially anti-ecumenism, but have been able to do so far more successfully at times than the hierarchy has been able to spread a refutation of such, let alone the obverse truth. Unless action is taken, and taken expediently and authoritatively, the Dyer, err, dire, state of affairs we all find ourselves in, will undoubtedly only become far, far worse.

What is Discord? It is a social media platform which supports the creation of many "servers" which are basically communities housing multiple chatrooms where users can chat through text, voice calls, and video messaging, and usually function as a rapid-text forum. The communities, usually formed around a specific interest, can be created by anyone, and, as long as they abide by the Discord terms of service, can have their own rules and moderation team to enforce them however

⁹ The writing of this article was completed, besides small edits over time, on February 6, 2023. My articles were removed from the *Patristic Faith* site, however the activities directed against me by this group have not stopped, nor do I expect them too soon. On February 7, 2023, I found that without any warning I had been banned from the Discord server of a virtual acquaintance because in his words sent to me by private message: "You were kicked for the protection of the server due to some people from multiple other servers that added me to a group saying you are spreading some bad stuff. I am truly sorry please forgive me, but if I don't then the entire server will be affiliated with those claims, please forgive me." I bear no ill-will whatsoever towards this person as he is simply part of a corrupted online environment in which a group intimidates others to shun those who fall out of their good grace, and anyone who does not march to their tune is slandered, dogpiled by the mob, and ostracized.

they please. Often these servers can only be entered if one is given permission by the moderators, and a ban means loss of contact with all other members unless one is a member of another server with one's acquaintances.

The Orthodox Christian Discord server, founded by Jay Dyer with the support of Fr. Dcn Ananias Sorem, and now run by David Erhan, is a server said to be centred around Orthodox "apologetics", but it especially functions as a vast forum for catechesis. Thousands of inquirers and catechumens flock to the server to learn everything they need to know about Orthodoxy, including what the Orthodox mindset is, and they learn this by being directed to the videos of the inner circle of apologists who run the server, and by conversing with the moderators who are expected to promote the viewpoints of those who run the server. There are also clergy who become members of the server and who are given a special status to differentiate themselves from other members, but they are also expected to toe the line, and so for the most part they hardly ever interact with members from what I observed when I was a moderator. The clergy are used by the server for status; routinely it will be claimed that an online influencer or his server has "clergy backing" by pointing to their presence in his server.¹⁰ One such clergyman who seems to be used in this way by Jay Dyer is Metropolitan Jonah Paffhausen, who has livestreamed some of his catechetical talks on Dyer's server, but has, to my knowledge, since stopped doing so. I even remember that while I was still a moderator on Jay Dyer's server, the moderator team discussed how Metropolitan Jonah would need to be silenced regarding his views on evolution. Of course, Fr. Dcn. Ananias Sorem,¹¹

¹⁰ This idea is itself a mutation of the digital age which requires a response. According to the ancient canons, clergy were not allowed to exercise their teaching authority outside their canonical bounds (Canon 20 of the Quinisext Council). Today however, the internet allows these bounds to be easily circumvented, even for a priest under no bishop (such as Fr. Peter Heers of OrthodoxEthos.com) to stake out a community of his own. And though digital, these are real communities with cultures and loyalties, and they influence the real world. Of course, clergy and laity alike have always been able to do scholarly theological work with no boundaries, but to promote this work under a cleric's teaching authority, to try and give it the force of official power, is not only a gross innovation but a separation of teaching authority from its source in the bishop and proper order of the episcopate. Such is likely not the intention of most of these clergy used so opportunistically by online influencers in this way, but in effect schools of *clerici vagantes* are being formed around online charismatic personalities to give them legitimacy. The discipline of the Church must be updated to deal with these issues of the digital age.

¹¹ On the date of March 1, 2023, Fr. Dcn. Ananias Sorem posted the following message on the social media app Twitter.com in response to a message criticizing Jay Dyer as a negative influence:

"People think all kinds of crazy things. So that isn't surprising. However, just look at the things the people who are critical of Jay support. It's very telling. Also, to be critical of Jay is to side against all the clergy on Patristic Faith, as well as our clergy advisory board."

(<https://twitter.com/AnaniasFather/status/1631024426035847168>)

In effect Fr. Dcn. Ananias is saying that this "clergy board," for which he to my knowledge is the spokesman, as a group identify themselves with the person and ideas of Jay Dyer to the point where to criticize Dyer is to be "against" them, to be their enemy. Fr. Dcn. Ananias is here also asserting clerical authority. To criticize Dyer is presented as going against the authority of the clergy, but, as I point out above, clergy have no authority apart from their bishop, and their authority even under a bishop can only be exercised in their proper jurisdiction. This said, if Fr. Dcn. Ananias' words accurately represent the stance of this "clergy board," then this ragtag group of priests and deacons are setting themselves up as a teaching authority apart from the bishops, have established Jay Dyer's personality and teaching as their benchmark to judge friend from foe, and thus are actively participating in the creation of a

the creator of *PatristicFaith.com* and a contributor to the book *Let No One Fear Death*, a collection of articles attacking the Covid-19 measures taken by the Church and purporting to provide “the” Orthodox response, published by Fr. Peter Heer’s *Uncut Mountain Press*, is the main clerical supporter.¹²

So, who exactly are the ones determining the faith-formation of thousands of Orthodox converts? They are two men, Jay Dyer and David Erhan. Jay Dyer runs a YouTube channel which has for its main content geopolitical analysis decrying the Western Atlanticist “elites,” film analysis steeped in conspiracy theory, and Orthodox apologetics which can be summed up as neo-palamism mixed with presuppositional apologetics originating from 20th century Reformed theology, put in the service of a rigorist ecclesiology opposed to ecumenism and an apologetic method in which one can refute all other worldviews without studying them by simply identifying certain flaws in their presuppositions while asserting Orthodoxy gives the only coherent and justifiable worldview. Dyer has a sizeable (enormous in Orthodox circles) social media following (39k twitter followers; 107k YouTube subscribers)¹³ and is also a frequent guest and host for the infamous Alex Jones’ *InfoWars* show.¹⁴ David Erhan is Dyer’s protégé, a young man in his 20s from Turkey, and the

sectarian community with its own standards of Orthodoxy and its own authorities. A “church” within the Church, it is parasitic upon the bishops for sacramental legitimacy but dispenses with the teaching authority of the episcopate.

¹² On February 9, 2023, Jay Dyer posted a brief article titled *On the Authority to Publicly Teach*, on his website *JaysAnalysis.com*. In it he claims that for a layman to have a public ministry they must have the backing of their clergy, and so he (Jay Dyer) will now only work with and recognize those “who have explicit permission and blessing from clergy who will publicly respond to inquiries about said persons.” However, in this same article he spins a conspiracy about clergy scheming against him and his “circle,” links this with the idea that Orthodoxy is in danger of imminently being compromised by FBI infiltration and a union with Rome, and so labels any clergy he deems as part of this “co-opted and liberalized agency” persona non grata. Thus, the lie is put to his words about clerical accountability. Jay Dyer and his circle, not the clergy, are the ones who choose the standard of Orthodoxy for themselves and the online Orthodox community, and any clergy who disagree are made into the “other” to be opposed. In short, unsuspecting clergyman are being opportunistically used by these online influencers to validate their theological stances, even their abusive online behavior, with an illusory “officiality,” pitting them against other clergy in a conscious effort to cause division virtually and in real parish life.

¹³ Compare these numbers with those of the official social media accounts of the OCA and GOA, as well as any Orthodox program, clergyman, or academic theologian and one will see that Jay Dyer has a larger following than all of them individually and even many of them combined. This means in the online sphere Dyer’s content is the first introduction to Orthodoxy many people have. It also means that, for many young men and women coming from evangelical and right-wing backgrounds, Dyer and whoever he promotes can be considered the face of Orthodoxy, a horrifying thought for a Church filled with Saints, clergy, learned theologians of marvelous character, and even laymen far more capable of leading one to humility through their example than Dyer seems to be...

¹⁴ While beyond my own knowledge or capability to analyze, for those with the ability to do so, the political element in all this should not be ignored. Jay Dyer is a regular host of Alex Jones’ *InfoWars* and is increasingly becoming a notable figure in the right-wing and far right online sphere, while already being perhaps the most popular and influential Orthodox online personality. Dyer caters to this online culture in his aesthetics, conduct, and media content. His presentation of Orthodoxy also takes advantage of the US culture wars and plays upon the recent fascination of the right-wing and far right with Russia as the bastion of moral values and Christian power. It should be noted that Dyer and most of the clergy associated publicly with *Patristic Faith* are members of ROCOR, and while Dyer selectively uses the work of neopatristic theologians and favors neo-Palamism his outlook on 20th-21st century Orthodox history seems to be that of the anti-ecumenical, anti-modernity and pro-monarchist strand in ROCOR.

man who currently runs Jay Dyer's Orthodox Christian Discord server. Erhan also does geopolitical analysis through his YouTube channel, for example supporting Russia in its war against Ukraine, but most of his work is apologetics against Oriental Orthodox and the Assyrian Church of the East, lambasting them as heretics and attempting to undermine the agreed ecumenical statements between our Churches in the eyes of the online community. Erhan is also known online as a misogynist, having early in his YouTube career even made a video asserting that women are not made in the image of God according to the fathers¹⁵, and consistently engaging in misogynist rhetoric on his social media platforms.

These two laymen, Jay Dyer and David Erhan, are dictating the catechetical formation of the next generation of Orthodox, not only converts but also cradle-born. The moderation team on the Discord server they run is expected to think like them and enforce their views to be a part of the inner circle from which they may create more apologists to spread their personal version of Orthodoxy. Those on the server who express a different vision of Orthodoxy are ridiculed and expected to change their tune, and if they do not do so, are banned, and ostracized. Effectively, such a cyber banning is an excommunication in the minds of the members. In fact, upon being banned from Jay Dyer's server I personally was messaged by someone sincerely wondering if I had apostatized from Orthodoxy! The users of this server do not know sound Orthodoxy from false, they are simply attracted by the assurance the online influencers give them through "winning" debates, sympathize with the moral struggle against "degeneracy" that is familiar to them coming especially from moralist evangelicalism, identify with the right-wing nationalist atmosphere, and rally around their "apologists" as internet celebrities who use the same language and online mannerisms of right-wing meme culture as they do. Thus, in effect, such is intellectual Orthodoxy to them. Theology is simply the weapon of this cultic mindset, and any expression of Orthodox thought which would challenge this innately hostile beast, ala affirming the validity of heterodox sacraments, is deemed by its gatekeepers as "confusing" inquirers and something to be banned, something which would erode the sectarian "us vs them" version of Orthodoxy they are inculcating in a whole online generation to be aimed at anyone they please, not to mention to aim them into their wallets.

Unsurprisingly, with such a massive influence in a relatively small online community, it goes beyond its initial bounds and exerts pressure on others. Jay Dyer has continuously attacked *Ancient Faith Radio* and Fr. Andrew Damick, as well as other clergy and even bishops such as Archbishop Alexander Golitzin of Dallas and the Diocese of the South and Archbishop Benjamin Peterson of San Francisco and the West, as being part of a conspiracy in the hierarchy (often singling out the Orthodox Church in America as a corrupt institution) to undermine his circle and "subvert" the Orthodox faith with ecumenism and by promoting "degeneracy." The same rhetoric is used by

Because of this it is telling that Dyer consistently and outspokenly attempts to undermine the credibility of the OCA and its bishops. Dyer perpetuates the defining of America as "enemy" of Orthodoxy by frequently labeling those who defend the OCA "Ameridox," a pejorative meant to bring their Orthodoxy into question by identifying them with America as "degenerate," while directing his followers towards ROCOR.

¹⁵ David Erhan. [@therealMedWhite]. (2020, January 17). Early Church Fathers on Women: A Small Florilegium [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/o_2088aX2XM

David Erhan. Dyer has also bragged that his reach online is greater than *Ancient Faith Radio*, and he seems to be right according to online statistics. *Patristic Faith* was also consciously started by Fr. Dcn. Ananias Sorem to be a response to *Ancient Faith Radio*, PF being “based” as opposed to the supposedly worldly AFR.¹⁶ They are out, we, the “based and redpilled”¹⁷ identified with this group of online influencers, are in. Thus, other orthodox communities on Discord are pressured to agree with the stance of Dyer and his influencer posse, and any which do not are labeled with the usual dog whistles to make it clear they are to be avoided. And, God forbid if you gain respect for your theological knowledge, or develop a following, and therefore appear on their radar, as if you do, Dyer’s posse will monitor your posts to determine your compatibility with them and ability to be molded. If you are not compatible with them, you are labeled as to be avoided. And, if you are influential enough and disagree with them on something or allude to them in a way they don’t like, you will be contacted, likely by Jay Dyer himself, demanding that you “reconcile,” by which is meant submission and taking back any comments made. As one who was part of their group and foolish enough to let them know who I am, I know full well how they threaten to dox you and smear you online unless you stay silent.

It is, in no uncertain terms, a dangerous cult lead by seemingly mentally unstable charismatic leaders, complete with shunning and moral justification for treating the one shunned in otherwise morally reprehensible ways. It is therefore “a church within the Church,” and a whole generation is being catechized into it. One could say it is very Gnostic, despite the misuse that term receives, and thus subversive.

The Anti-Theology of this Cult

In an online community like this it can be hard to clearly define its belief system. It may be contended that a sociological or psychological profile would be more profitable for analyzing these things, perhaps they are, but I am not a psychologist or sociologist. I have theological training and I think, muddy as the waters may be, there is a key that can open up the path to a clearer vision of what the ethos of this cult is. In my personal conversations with Jay Dyer and David Erhan, and in

¹⁶ The inherently sectarian nature of *Patristic Faith* aside, it can also not be overstated that it is based on Jay Dyer’s cult of personality. The primary draw to the *Patristic Faith* site is Jay Dyer, with his large social media following catering to a far-right audience, and those online influencers who get a following by association with him, including Fr. Dcn. Ananias. Without Jay Dyer the site would likely crumble and be left without much of an audience at all, let alone one which could rival *Ancient Faith Radio*, and of course the site would not make any money. Anyone invested in the running of this site is in a debt to Dyer, and that includes the clergy. This is the danger of para-church organizations, they are not really of the Church, and, when paired with sectarian, conspiracist views, and dependant on one man, they can quickly and easily turn into cults.

¹⁷ In this community the slang term “based” is usually used to signify being (a) opposed to degeneracy, which includes opposing any group, person, or idea the community opposes, and (b) stating one’s opinions, especially when having to do with conspiracy, denigration of another group, or fundamentalism, in blunt terms while refusing any further dialogue or “elaborating.” A balanced or academic approach to questions is termed “gay,” while an inflexible and violent approach is considered masculine and therefore “based.” The term “red-pilled” refers to the film series *The Matrix* and signifies becoming aware of the conspiratorial reality of something that was previously hidden. It is also used simply to designate those persons, groups, or ideas the community approves of.

their own explication of how they approach the question of sacraments outside the Church's canonical bounds, both routinely appeal to the need for a "synthesis" of all the fathers. But a synthesis requires a standpoint from which to synthesize, so what is that standpoint? In the patristic tradition those fathers who defend the validity of sacraments outside the canonical bounds are very clear in their theological reasoning and explicit that to, for example, baptize again someone who was already baptized is a grave sin. The fathers who adhere to a rigorist view of no sacraments outside the Church are also clear on the opposite view. There is contradiction here, so whence synthesis? Is it reached from the standpoint of engaging with the theological reasoning of the two sides to see which is more accurate, and choosing one side while trying to show the good aspects of certain language or thought in the other to be synthesized? Is it, though theologically unadventurous, at least approached from the standpoint of simply asserting the conciliar rulings, both ancient and as held by the current majority of the hierarchy? No, not for Dyer and Erhan.

The synthesis, according to Jay Dyer and David Erhan, is to assert that what the heterodox administer is simply a bare form (by which they mean ritual with no grace and no effect). In short, it is the ahistorical idea of *Oikonomia-Akrivia* created in the 18th century and largely perpetuated by Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky, known for his moralism in theology, according to which, by economy, the Church can fill any outward form it wishes with the grace of any sacrament. Of course, that is not Saint Augustine's view, nor that of the council of Carthage of A.D. 419, which state that the full divine sacrament is administered among the heterodox, and one's faith is placed in it even on reception into the Church, and this has been the theology of the Western and Russian churches explicitly. It is also not the view of Saint Cyprian who recognized that if the heterodox have no sacraments it is impossible to skip baptism in receiving them, so there dies the synthesis of "all the fathers."¹⁸ But worse, Dyer's and Erhan's is a horribly mutilated sacramental theology. If their *Oikonomia* theory were true, that would mean that the physical form of the sacraments are not integral to the sacraments' reality, it does not contribute essentially to its working nor is it part of the sacraments' intelligible nature, rather grace alone is the "reality" of the sacrament, formless grace, capable of being given under any form for any reason. This cannot fit with the sacramentology of, say, Saint Nicholas Cabasilas, for whom the grace and visible form are one whole reality of the sacrament, and the form is essential in baptism, for example, as what is enforming us into the image of Christ. As Christ after the union is one Person in and as two natures, the same is true of the sacraments. No extrinsicism can be introduced here.¹⁹

¹⁸ For an overview of the official theological dialogues and their conclusions on the matter of *Oikonomia*, namely that the 18th century idea formed in reaction to Rome's missionary encroachment is an innovation and theologically indefensible, see Mos Grigore Dinu, "Is 'Sacramental *Oikonomia*' a Coherent and Faithful Expression of Orthodox Ecclesiology and is it Useful for its Ecumenical Vocation? Reflections on some Theological Conceptions and Official Statements" in *Tradiția Canonică și Misiunea Bisericii* (RO: Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai, Presa Universitară Clujeană 2018), 74-100.

¹⁹ In opposition to the Orthodox understanding of the sacraments as what would be termed "ontologically identical symbols," the whole sacrament being Christ under a specific embodied form or mode of presence, this *Oikonomia* theorist sacramentology would make the sacraments into merely connotative, sensual, or even arbitrary signs! For this classification see Pekka Metso, "Divine Presence in the Eucharistic Theology of Nicholas Cabasilas" *Dissertations in Education, Humanities, and Theology* (Joensuu, FI: University of Eastern Finland, 2010), 22-25. I must also point

This Docetist, Assumptionist, and indeed Apollinarian sacramentology was devastatingly critiqued in the most decisive manner by Fr. Georges Florovsky's 1933 article *The Limits of the Church*.²⁰ The sacraments are the whole Person and activity of Christ as God-man. They are the foundations of the Church, not subject to it or changeable by it anymore than Christ is changeable by or subject to the Church. The Church in recognizing the sacraments outside its canonical boundaries is recognizing the presence and activity of Christ; the historical enacting of the sacraments is a meaning bearing sign pointing to their reality. The activity of Christ thus discerned is the chief justification which not only implies but compels Orthodox ecumenism. The Oikonomia theory of sacraments on the other hand, apart from introducing a separation of grace and form alien to Orthodoxy, opens the way to the most extreme innovation²¹ and reveals itself as anti-theological. The administration of one or another sacramental form becomes arbitrary, the sign of the sacrament has no rational function, Christ "is not" the form of the sacrament, He "is" only the grace, so by the form nothing can be reached logically, and then who decides what any of these things mean? Well, those who are illumined by grace of course! Historical tradition has no meaning except that given to it by those privileged ones. Of course, the identity of these oracles and who we listen to so that we can discern their identity, is based on their adherence to these disputed set of ideas we have decided are true... but seeing as reasoning in history is already destroyed, why not accept vicious circularity? No one needs reason or self-searching when "the" Orthodox ethos is under attack!

The above theological result is embraced by Fr. Peter Heers of OrthodoxEthos.com.²² While I know Jay Dyer does not want to go this route, as he has critiqued Fr. Peter's lackeys for such

out that talk of "validity" and the relation between grace and form in regard to sacraments is very much Orthodox, and modern Orthodox sacramentology in returning to more dynamic patristic conceptions of the sacraments only highlights the key points made above and their ecumenical import. See for example Fr. Alexander Schmemmann's "Sacrament and Symbol" in *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 135-151. Also see the late Met. John Zizioulas', *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 243-246.

²⁰ Fr. Georges Florovsky, "The Limits of the Church" in *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*. Edited by Brandon Gallaher and Paul Ladouceur (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 247-256.

²¹ What innovation could be more extreme than denying Christ's own command to baptize? The rigorist adhering to the Oikonomia theory says that no one outside the Church's canonical bounds has baptism and yet the Church can receive them without baptizing for reasons of convenience. Such innovatory and legalistic Phariseeism is condemned by Christ, "For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men... Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition... Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye (Mrk 7:8,9, 13)."

²² While advocating for the view that a bare form can be made a sacrament retroactively by the administration of a completely different sacrament, something unheard of prior to the 18th century, Fr. Peter Heers also regularly advocates for "corrective baptisms" of individuals brought into the Church through chrismation or confession. There is no logic to be found here, as corrective baptisms clearly imply that one cannot give the grace of one sacrament through another, while "economic" reception without baptism implies sacramental forms are all interchangeable, that is if one rejects the reality of sacraments outside the Church's bounds which are thus not repeated. Fr. Heers therefore seems to be stuck between a rigorism leading down the path to "Genuine Orthodox" schism, and a sacramentology logically entailing complete sacramental relativism. The only thing that keeps this irrational identity

attitudes before, the result is virtually the same. For Jay Dyer, David Erhan, and those who willingly support their view on this question, the real justification for their views is that the degenerates outside of Orthodoxy simply cannot have the sacraments, they are wrong, they are polluted, we must use apologetics rejecting everything about these unwashed groups, which are easily dealt with when boiled down to certain principles and abstracted from their whole life as well as the Orthodox Church's complicated historical relationship with them, to save them!²³

In short, it is an ahistorical, illogical, and thus untraditional and anti-theological stance defined vis-à-vis the "other," a transposition of the evangelical right-wing fundamentalist ethos into Orthodoxy.²⁴ While the label "rigorism" can be vague, this circle of online influencers and schismatic Old Calendarist or Genuine Orthodox groups share the same anti-theological stance regarding the sacraments and ecclesiology, how far they take this and what flavor it assumes are only based on the different subcultures they are influenced by and whether they selectively decide to adhere to the boundaries of the Church or not. This can be seen especially in that Jay Dyer, David Erhan, and their circle, promote constant insubordination to hierarchal authority and inculcate in their followers the idea that the episcopate, as regards its teaching authority, is something to at best be tolerated while doubted as malicious in intent, if not outright rejected. Not only regarding Covid requirements, but also the very opposition to the affirmation of sacraments outside the Church and ecumenism, catechizing converts to reject these things and disdain the hierarchs who teach them, is an egregious example. Such is evidenced by the Moscow Jubilee Synod of 2000 and the Moscow Patriarchate's social document, the Holy and Great Synod of Crete 2016, the agreed statements between the North American Orthodox and Roman Catholic Assemblies of Bishops, and the agreed statements between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, the "consensus" of the Church's episcopate is clear. So why are thousands being catechized in opposition to this? Would this not count as obvious and flagrant subversion by Dyer, Erhan and their ilk?

together is opposition to everyone seen as "subversive" and loyalty to what he sees as the "living saints" of Athos, whose holiness makes them the true magisterium of the Church and, apparently, makes theological incoherency coherent by appeal to their authority.

²³ How far this is from Saint Philaret of Moscow's statement that "I do not presume to call false any Church, believing that Jesus is the Christ." Of course, in this online community Saint Philaret is mostly known by a quote attributed to him about "hating the enemies of God" and "destroying the enemies of the fatherland." It is justification of militancy, not nuanced theological reflection, that is most attractive to Dyer, Erhan and their ilk.

²⁴ One could say that the online "Orthobro" movement with Jay Dyer and his circle at its head, completely inverts the proper order of theological disciplines. Rather than apologetics being informed by and constantly returning for clarification to sound academic theology, which strives for self criticism and accuracy, and to the witness of official ecumenical dialogues, which are conducted by scholars having proper understanding of their disciplines and overseen by our hierarchy, this movement operates on the principle that apologetics comes prior to and supersedes academic theology and ecumenical dialogue. This is because for the "Orthobros," like other rigorist groups such as Old Calendarists or even scholastic manualists, certain ideas and attitudes are taken as axiomatically true and integral to their identity, apart from the actual historical reality of these things or their theological coherency, and theology is only a tool to justify these ideas and attitudes ad hoc. This is illustrated above in their anti-ecumenical ecclesiology and the mutilated sacramentology they generate to defend it.

A Warning in Conclusion

In the digital-information age the problem of a parasitic force poisoning the Orthodox consciousness of the next generation can and has rapidly grown. This must be brought to the attention of the clergy. They, online influencers of distorted Orthodoxy are catechizing those converts clergy should be catechizing, they are acting as a teaching authority for those who should be following the example of clergy. The infection has already spread into the Church and the next generation of clergy are being poisoned! It can indeed be compared to a zombie infection in that its motives and impulses are based on the illogical distorted passions of insecurity, hatred, pride, and a rejection of theological thought (which in turn justifies the hateful coercion of others). As “a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit (Mtt 7:18),” so too an identity structured around a key belief/attitude which is fundamentally anti-theological in its grounding can only lead to a further poisoning of this identity as its irrationality is strained throughout, leading to the whole identity succumbing to irrationality, to a logos-less existence in precisely the Orthodox understanding of sins destructive effects on nature, continually degenerating in the whirlwind of slavery to passions, a walking corpse.

Of course, I do not judge the hierarchy. And, while I would not claim to have “the answers” to this dilemma of the age we are in, I believe that recognizing the danger is a crucial step towards resolving it, and that this awareness needs to be spread as quickly as possible. That said, I do believe circulating this letter to all Orthodox clergy in North America, at the very least, may be called for. I would also point out that this pietist irrationality was identified by Fr. Georges Florovsky as the real danger of prelest which has been an ever-present threat throughout the ages, and which our age is called to combat:

The age of theology is dawning once again and our time is summoned to theologize... The time has come when evading theological knowledge is becoming a mortal sin, a stigma of smugness and the absence of love, of faintheartedness and duplicity. Advocating the abandonment of complexity for the sake of simplicity is revealed as a demonic delusion, and the distrust of inquisitive reason must be denounced as an demonic intimidation... Apart from Holy Tradition, Orthodoxy is a task, not one that must be sought out, but one that is given and assigned, a living leaven, a burgeoning seed, our duty and our calling... we have been granted the freedom and the power of spiritual action, of witness and of the proclamation of the Good News – a fact that imposes on us the duty [*podvig*] of bearing witness, creating and building. Only this effort [*podvig*] will justify the past, full as it was of presentiments and warnings, despite its weaknesses and errors. A true historical synthesis is less an interpretation of the past than a creative fulfillment of the future.²⁵

Undoubtedly, this vision and call by Fr. Georges Florovsky has been taken up by many great Orthodox theologians, hierarchs, and laity alike, but also no doubt this same danger of irrationality masking itself in tradition remains, and we must ask how many have been and are being catechized into its vacuous “phronema?” Of course, history shows us that those who understand that Orthodoxy requires a living theological thought that exposes the unconscious accretions of so-

²⁵ Florovsky, “Breaks and Links,” 173-179.

called traditions, a conscious effort that pushes the boundaries of theology not by transgression but by the very inner dynamism and fecundity of revelation, are few and share a cross of loneliness; however, does this mean the polar opposite should be the condition of the masses, rejecting theological thought in favor of passions and rabid search for security to be found in opportunists? Does not this path lead to ruin, so familiar from our readings of the great Church fathers made into martyrs and confessors by ignorant fanatics? The spirit of Ivan the Terrible and his Oprichnina is alive and well today, oppression covered in holy garb on various national levels, but also in lesser but still dangerous degrees when this very attitude is ingrained in the laity by mini-Ivan's, stooping to the level of threatening coercion as thought police.

All the above said, I did not write this article to condemn Jay Dyer, David Erhan and their ilk; I wrote this article because I love them, as we must love all people, and wish to see them be faithful sons of the Church. I absolutely recognize that their circle has been instrumental in leading many to become catechumens and even to be baptized into the Church; however, simply because the ends are sometimes holy does not mean the means are not sometimes unholy and end up leading to abject disaster for both converts and the parishes that receive them.

That said, I have conscientiously followed Matthew 18:15-20 and spoken to Dyer and Erhan personally in the past, to no avail, and I know that many others have as well, and I simply believe now is the time for someone to "tell it unto the church" as verse 17 of the aforementioned pericope of Scripture counsels. And, while I am unfit to be a spokesman for holy Orthodoxy, the fact is that I was not only one who was once under this circles sway and influence, but one who also earned their respect to the point of being made a moderator on Dyer's Orthodox Christian Discord server and even a contributor and quasi-editor of *Patristic Faith* that both are so heavily affiliated with, yet have been freed from such a cult through the Lord's grace and mercy, I hope and pray that this article will be a blessing to the Church and bring glory to God, as that is my greatest desire.

Regardless, I also sincerely believe that Orthodoxy cannot be reduced to sectarian tendencies grabbing for security. Orthodoxy is catholic, universal qualitatively, and infinite in depth. Its tradition is eschatological, not as rejecting the past, but as understanding the past to have been imbued with the eschaton while also expecting it, and thus tradition in the present's fidelity to the past is one imbued with infinite potentials for its own free development into that eschaton which will be the sum of all things, the Body of Christ built up into the fullness of Him Who is all in all. As such, the life of the Church as free must also be rational, rational and free being inseparable from one another. The hierarchy must give authoritative rulings on theological issues, certainly, but they do so in witness to the catholic voice of the Church's reflection. Hierarchy and laity are inter-dependant in the theological life of the Church. Sickness in one leads to sickness in the other; irrationality cannot be tolerated on any level, just as slavery cannot be tolerated, and a cult of censorship and coercion is the carrier of the virus of irrationality and slavery.

Addendum: I sincerely wish that by publishing this article I have made these serious issues known to the Church and can move past these problems in my own life. I do not want any further contact with Jay Dyer or those in his circle, nor will I stoop to their methods. For me this is not an academic disagreement to be hashed out, it is a matter of exposing and being free of an abusive cult, and I shake off the dust of my feet at them. While Dyer and his circle have received criticism from Orthodox laity and clergy for years no one to this point has put forward a concise expose and analysis both of the behavior and theological mindset of this cult. I now have, and I hope it is not in vain. I also hope that this article will show the need for clarity in affirming those statements the Church has made in ecumenical dialogue, as it is this ambiguity which is most exploited by the ravening wolves.

It is likely that in one way or another Jay Dyer and his circle will hear of or come across this article. If so and they wish to respond, they will likely do so by whipping up an online mob, making angry tweets, and posting videos attacking single points of my article (or myself personally) and boiling them down into rhetorical snippets for their followers. And this is an issue because these methods of discourse online promote and thrive on ambiguity and non-wholistic expressions of thought. What is really necessary is for these “Orthobros” to systematically articulate their stances on the issues raised in this article, especially as regards their (a) belief that ecumenism is apostasy, (b) their belief that the bishops of those jurisdictions engaged in ecumenical activity have no teaching authority and are to be opposed, and (c) their actions of making priestly authority autonomous from the bishops, consolidating this stolen authority around lay teachers, and seeking to enforce this pseudo-authority on laymen across jurisdictions including by using threats and social pressure. Of course, to clarify is antithetical to the business of opportunists like this and would only lift the fog for all to see that they have and are forming a counter-church within the Church.