

REVIEW ARTICLE: ORTHODOX THEOLOGIES OF THE AFTERLIFE

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Demetrios Bathrellos, “Love, Purification, and Forgiveness versus Justice, Punishment, and Satisfaction: The Debates on Purgatory and the Forgiveness of Sins at the Council of Ferrara-Florence,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 65, 1 (2014): 78–121.

Vasileios Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). 214 pp. ISBN 9781107139442.

Shawn McAvoy, *Demonic Trials and Whispers: An Inquiry into the Origins of Logismoi and the Telōnia* (Dewdney, BC: Synaxis Press, 2013). 198 pp. ISBN 97814986224.

St Anthony’s Greek Orthodox Monastery, *The Departure of the Soul according to the Teaching of the Orthodox Church: A Patristic Anthology* (Florence, AZ: St. Anthony’s Greek Orthodox Monastery, 2017). 1,111 p. incl. 216 pp. of color illustrations. ISBN 9781945699009.

Denis F. Sullivan, Alice-Mary Talbot, and Stamatina McGrath, eds., *The Life of St. Basil the Younger: Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Moscow Version* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2014). 842 pp. ISBN 9780884023975.

The Orthodox tradition contains several strands of thinking on the afterlife, based primarily on indications in Scripture, especially Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, and also on writings of Fathers of the Church and other saints over the centuries. But the only church dogmas on the afterlife which have received the formal approval of the Church-in-Council or an

1 I am grateful to Edith M. Humphrey (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary) for her comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

ecumenical council are those in the Nicene Creed: that Christ “will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead”; and “I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” While Orthodoxy recognizes sources of tradition other than Scripture and ecumenical councils, such as liturgy, the most authoritative doctrines are expressed in formal council pronouncements. Teachings on the afterlife beyond the Creed are those of their authors, however prestigious they may be, which have not been the subject of conciliar discernment or pronouncements of the Orthodox Church. The tradition of the Orthodox Church, like that of the Catholic Church, consistently affirms the desirability and the efficacy of practices such as the commemoration of the deceased and prayers and other pious acts for the repose of their soul, without any certainty concerning the mechanism by which such pious practices operate, but in the full conviction and faith in divine goodness that these practices are beneficial for the deceased. The Orthodox ascetic tradition also retains the practice of *memento mori*, the memory of death, the recollection that this life comes to an end, as an aide in the spiritual life.

This is the general context in which the book *The Departure of the Soul according to the Teaching of the Orthodox Church* should be considered. *The Departure of the Soul (TDS)*, published by St Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery in Arizona, is a massive tome of some 1,111 pages. The book has been meticulously prepared and lavishly published and includes 216 pages of color illustrations. The main thrust of the book is to convey the message that the doctrine of the “toll-houses” is indeed the undisputable Teaching of the Orthodox Church. The toll-house doctrine is an expansion of the notion of the particular judgment immediately after death, a series of trials in which newly-deceased's good actions and bad actions are assessed.

According to the toll-house doctrine, the souls of the newly-deceased rise through the air, where they must pass through a series of trials or “toll-houses,” each devoted to a particular sin, on their way to their ultimate fate. The toll-houses are overseen by demons who examine the soul in relation to the sins in question, while the guardian angel brings forth evidence of virtue and repentance. This

constitutes a veritable “trial” (TDS, 34), modelled on human justice systems, with Christ as the judge. The demons allow the soul to continue on its way only if the soul or the guardian angel produce evidence of good actions which outweigh the evil accomplished—this is the “toll.” According to different sources, there may be up to 20 or even 24 toll-houses. In some accounts, failure to pass any one of the toll-houses results in the soul being hurled into hell. At the end of the trial, the soul “receives its allotment in the afterlife according to the life which it led on earth, either in Paradise, a place of repose and joy, or in Hades, a place of torment and sorrow” (TDS, 35), awaiting the general resurrection and the Second Coming of Christ.

There are several problems with the book. The first is that it represents a reductionist view of the richness of the Orthodox tradition concerning the afterlife, since it is limited to what we can call toll-house theology. This is only one strand of Orthodox approaches on the afterlife. In his excellent study *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium*, Vasileios Marinis states that “the Byzantines never produced a systematic theology on the post-mortem fate of the soul. Or, rather, they did so only in the fifteenth century, under duress at the Council of Ferrara-Florence” (Marinis, 2) (we return to this council below).

To support its argument that toll-house theology is the teaching of the Orthodox Church on the afterlife, *The Departure of the Soul* relies almost entirely on extracts of writings by a wide range of Fathers of the Church, canonized saints, elders, and other noted Orthodox authors. The list of saints “whose writings or lives refer to the trial of the soul at the hour of death” is impressive: 123, with some 178 texts (TDS, 1060–1063). For the purposes of this review, we will not question the authenticity of the selected texts or the accuracy of the translations. Undoubtedly every possible significant source which supports directly, indirectly, or even only remotely the main theses of the book concerning the particular judgment and the toll-houses has been faithfully recollected here.

The book is a resurrection of a bitter polemic within the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia (ROCOR) triggered by the

publication in 1980 of Fr Seraphim Rose's book *The Soul after Death*.² This book is credited with the modern revival of the toll-house teaching, even though the toll-houses are not its main focus. The conflagration which followed its publication was fed mostly by the polemical writings, especially the book *The Soul, the Body and Death*,³ of the then ROCOR deacon Lazar Puhalo (later priest and archbishop). In December 1980, the ROCOR Holy Synod attempted to put an end to the debate by forbidding access to ROCOR publications by both sides on the issue (*TDS*, 244–49).

The Departure of the Soul is not an academic study of Orthodox teachings on the afterlife, nor a devotional publication, but rather a polemical work in support of the toll-house doctrine. Indeed, some 270 pages are devoted to critiques of Lazar Puhalo's writings on the subject (*TDS*, 724–822 and 910–85), 50 pages to those of Fr Michael Azkoul⁴ who follows Puhalo closely (*TDS*, 823–73), and 35 pages to other “ancillary authors” who raise doubts about toll-house theology (*TDS*, 874–909).

St Mark of Ephesus and the Council of Ferrara

The Departure of the Soul (*TDS*) is a reductionist view of Orthodox thinking on the afterlife because it does not even intimate the existence of other strands of thinking on the afterlife within the Orthodox tradition. Another major strand of Orthodox thinking reached a summit in the position of the Orthodox Church at the Council of Ferrera in 1438. This council, which brought into dialogue representatives of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, was intended to heal the rift between Eastern and Western Christianity. One of the items on the table for discussion was their respective doctrines concerning the afterlife, especially the Western notion of purgatory. The principal Orthodox theologian and spokesman on the

2 Seraphim Rose, *The Soul after Death: Contemporary “After-Death” Experiences in the Light of the Orthodox Teaching on the Afterlife* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Press, 1980).

3 Lazar Puhalo, *The Soul, the Body and Death* (Dewdney, BC: Synaxis Press, 1980).

4 See especially Michael Azkoul, *The Toll-House Myth: The Neo-Gnosticism of Seraphim Rose* (Dewdney, BC: Synaxis Press, 1996).

issue was St Mark of Ephesus (1392–1444). St Mark prepared three documents on the subject and co-authored a fourth. These documents express the formal Orthodox position at the Ferrara Council concerning the afterlife. Prepared in the context of a council, the writings of St Mark on the afterlife, although never formally ratified by a pan-Orthodox council, constitute the most authoritative Orthodox texts on the subject. St Mark did not speak on his own behalf at the Council, but as representative of the Orthodox Church.

In his study, “The Debates on Purgatory and the Forgiveness of Sins at the Council of Ferrara-Florence,” Fr Demetrios Bathrellos summarizes the Orthodox position as expounded by St Mark as follows: “the souls of people who die with unforgiven minor sins will experience spiritual sufferings in the afterlife, which, however, are not divine punishments but self-inflicted consequences of these sins” (Bathrellos, 78). St Mark and the other Orthodox at the Council of Ferrara did not elaborate on the mechanism or the geography of the sufferings or purification in the afterlife, but insist systematically on divine love and forgiveness. In the Orthodox position at Ferrara—as indeed in the Catholic position as well—the newly-deceased fall into three categories: the perfect or sinless, who receive a foretaste of heaven; those guilty of grave sins, who receive a foretaste of hell; and those in the middle (*mesoi*), who are guilty of minor sins and hence are in need of purification, and who can be assisted by the prayer of the Church. The Orthodox at Ferrara insisted little on a specific doctrine of a particular judgment, and in none of St Mark’s documents is the toll-house doctrine mentioned, and neither demons nor angels play a role. Instead, the emphasis is on the consciousness or awareness of the soul in a sort of self-assessment of its life, an internal process of the person, rather than an external process modelled on a human justice system, with an accused, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and a judge, as in toll-house narratives.

Bathrellos characterizes the Orthodox position on the afterlife at the Ferrara Council as emphasizing “love, purification, and forgiveness,” whereas the Latin position stressed “justice, punishment, and satisfaction.” Toll-house theology, with its

emphasis on the trial of the soul, demons, justice, judgment, and punishment, is thus closer to the Latin position at Ferrara than to the Orthodox position, eloquently articulated by St Mark of Ephesus. The thrust of *The Departure of the Soul* is a monolithic focus on the toll-house strand of the Orthodox tradition concerning the afterlife, disregarding other approaches, notably that of the Orthodox Church at Ferrara.

Fr Seraphim Rose was well aware of the existence of this other strand of Orthodox thinking on the afterlife, since he included English translations of one of St Mark's Ferrara texts and part of another as annexes to his book *The Soul after Death*.⁵ But he writes little about St Mark's theology. He does not reconcile the strand of Orthodox thinking on the afterlife that stresses divine mercy and forgiveness articulated by St Mark with toll-house theology beyond the statement that "St. Mark's writings concern primarily the specific point of the state of souls after death, and barely touch on the history of events that occur to the soul immediately after death."⁶ Thus Rose's work on St Mark remains incomplete. He was in part handicapped because he used Russian translations of St Mark rather than the original Greek texts, with the inherent risk of inaccuracies in such secondary translations.

Over the centuries since the Council of Ferrara, there has been an evolution in Catholic thinking on the afterlife, such that modern Catholic theology now seems closer to the Orthodox position at the Council than to the original Latin position. Bathrellos writes: "Today ... many Roman Catholic theologians, including Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, understand purgatory in terms often more similar to those of Mark and the Greeks than to their Latin predecessors." And Bathrellos concludes his fine study: "The mutual, 'Greek' and 'Latin,' contemporary emphasis on the healing transformation of the souls in the middle state and on the loving forgiveness of God—rather than on his punishing justice—is a beacon of hope for a common, and better, way forward" (Bathrellos, 120–21).

5 See Rose, *The Soul after Death*, 207–20.

6 Rose, *The Soul after Death*, 206.

St Mark's exposition of Orthodox teaching on the afterlife at Ferrara validates the contention that there is not one Orthodox doctrine on the afterlife, but rather several different strands which have never been consolidated into a coherent theological framework.

Unfortunately, St Mark's theology of the afterlife remains a neglected field in modern scholarship. There is no definitive scholarly edition of his writings; the editions that exist are not readily available (they date from the 1920s); there are no complete translations; existing English translations are from Russian translations, not the original Greek; and, with the major exception of the Bathrellos article, there are few Orthodox studies of St Mark's theology.⁷

St Mark of Ephesus is not in the index of saints in *The Departure of the Soul* (1060–1065), but there are nonetheless two extracts from his Ferrara texts, one dealing with prayers and intercession for the deceased (*TDS*, 867), the other with souls being “made clear” (an uncertain translation from a citation in French; *TDS*, 869). These fail to convey the main thrust of St Mark's teachings on the afterlife. The single-minded focus on toll-house theology evident in *TDS* results in the minimization or suppression of any other strand of thought on the afterlife. It is thus unfortunate that the profound theology of St Mark on the afterlife risks being eclipsed by toll-house theology.

The New Ecclesiology

In the Orthodox tradition, the expression “the teaching of the Orthodox Church,” as employed in *The Departure of the Soul*, does not have the same theological sense as “the teaching of the Catholic Church.” Orthodoxy has no *cathedra* or *magisterium* corresponding to those in the Catholic Church, but rather a number of different sources of the faith or teachings, with varying degrees of authority attached to them. There are several slightly different orderings of these authorities, but foremost in importance is Scripture, especially

7 For earlier studies, see Alexander Schmemmann, “St Mark of Ephesus and the Theological Conflicts in Byzantium,” *SVTQ* 1.1 (1957): 11–24; and Constantine Tsirpanlis, *Mark Eugenius and the Council of Florence: A Historical Re-evaluation of His Personality* (Thessaloniki & New York: Centre for Byzantine Research, 1974), especially 76–84 on Mark's writings concerning purgatory.

the New Testament, and within the New Testament, the Gospels; then the dogmatic pronouncements of the ecumenical councils; the non-dogmatic declarations and canons of ecumenical councils and of other local councils of the church; the writings of the great Fathers on church dogmas; their writings on other theological issues; writings of other saints; the liturgy and icons; and the writings of other respected elders and theologians.

Grounded in Scripture and the conciliar nature of the Orthodox Church, the great universal dogmas of Orthodoxy, deemed essential for the self-understanding of Orthodoxy, and indeed for salvation, are those teachings that have been so proclaimed by the ecumenical councils: the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the title "Theotokos" (Mother of God) attributed to the Virgin Mary at the Third Ecumenical Council; the Christological formulae of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils; and the proclamation on icons of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Theologians argue that some dogmatic determinations of later councils, notably those concerning the distinction between divine essence and the divine energies of the Palamite councils between 1341 and 1351, should also be considered among the formal teachings of the Orthodox Church, even though these councils are not called ecumenical. In addition to the formal conciliar proclamation of a teaching of the Orthodox Church, such conciliar decisions must be received by the entire body of the Church. This ecclesiology is supported by examples of seemingly canonical councils whose decisions were subsequently overturned by later councils or which were rejected or ignored by the body of the Church: the Second Council of Ephesus of 449, the iconoclast councils of 754 and 815, and the Council of Ferrara of 1438. The outcomes of these and other rejected councils pass into history, not the living tradition of the church.

No ecumenical council or even local council has ever pronounced itself on the toll-house doctrine; and indeed *The Departure of the Soul*, for all its thoroughness, does not cite a single conciliar statement on this subject. The best that the editors of the book come up with is an 1882 report of the Synodal Educational Committee of

the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church (appointed by the czar and not composed entirely of bishops) approving a book by a Fr Mitrophan, who refers to the toll-houses (*TDS*, 242–43), and the minutes of the 1980 synodal decision on the toll-house controversy by the ROCOR Holy Synod (*TDS*, 244–49). The decision censures Lazar Puhalo in particular for his theory of the insensibility of the soul “in some state of sleep” because of its separation from the body after death, and it refers in passing to the presence of the toll-houses in lives of the saints and liturgical texts, but it does not formally endorse the toll-house doctrine. Indeed, the decision contains a categorical statement which places the toll-house teaching in its proper dogmatic context: “Actually, no one can dogmatically establish the existence of the toll-houses precisely in accordance with the form described in the dream [of Gregory recounted in the Life] of Basil the New, insofar as no direct indication thereto is to be found in the Scriptures” (*TDS*, 247).

To support the contention that the toll-houses represent the teaching of the Orthodox Church, the editors of *The Departure of the Soul* advance a new ecclesiology. This ecclesiology is explained as follows:

Over the centuries, the Orthodox doctrine of the particular judgment of the soul was confirmed by the direct divine revelation granted by God to numerous saints in a mystery (1 Cor 2:7). Having been given the *theoria*, or spiritual vision, of the trial of the soul at the hour of death, the saints then described this spiritual reality with words and images. Guided also by God in their choice of words describing the holy visions—the expressions of nearly inexpressible spiritual concepts—the Fathers then proclaimed their edifying teachings in order to help the faithful attain to the Kingdom of Heaven. In this way, the saints’ experience of spiritual realities transmitted through their teachings has become the primary vehicle of testimony through which the Orthodox Church receives its doctrine. [...]

Thus, the saints’ knowledge of the trail at death is empirical—a direct revelation from God. They then conveyed the revelation to the Church through their holy teachings. The

transmission of this revelation has two components: one is pure revelation from God to his saint, and the other is a revelation or disclosure of the content of the experience in the form of a teaching that the saint then offers to the Church. (*TDS*, 35–36)

This ecclesiology is reiterated in several places in the book and is even generalized as a universal principle for the development of doctrine in the Orthodox Church:

The fundamental flaw in the ancillary authors' writings is their exclusion of the primary body of evidence on the subject: the very record of the Orthodox saints' personal knowledge in *theoria* (visions) of the trial of the soul at the hour of death. *Since revelations given by God to his saints in theoria (visions) are sacred transmissions of spiritual knowledge impervious to infiltration by heretical concepts, they constitute an infallible witness to the Orthodox doctrine of the toll-houses [our emphasis].* (*TDS*, 874)

The editors attach such importance to spiritual visions that they emerge as more significant than Scripture in the determination of the doctrines of the Orthodox Church, as in this statement:

The visions, or more accurately, the *theorias* granted by God to his saints—divine revelations of the spiritual realities beyond sense perception that are beheld with the inner eyes of the soul—are, *after God himself, the very foundation of the doctrines of the Orthodox Church*” [our emphasis]. (*TDS*, 897)

There is no mention of Scripture, the Church or councils. And some pages later, we read: “Spiritual realities experienced in *theoria* by the saints and transmitted to the Church through their teachings is [sic] *the basis on which the Church forms its doctrine*” (*TDS*, 944). Indeed, the writings describing the *theoria*-visions toll-houses have the same significance as Scripture itself, since their authors are “guided also by God in their choice of words describing the holy visions” (*TDS*, 35).

The Departure of the Soul thus advances a new ecclesiology to buttress its contention that toll-house theology is the infallible teaching of the Orthodox Church. The thesis that Orthodox doctrines are founded on *theoria*-visions is not only historically

inaccurate, it marks a radical departure from the ecclesiology of the Fathers of Church and the ecumenical councils. Even St Paul did not draw on his visions to establish doctrine, saying instead that he had “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor 12:4). Rather, he passed on what he had learned from the Lord, through the apostles. His visions served to certify his apostolic authority, not to define his teachings. The theology of the Fathers and the councils was based first and foremost on divine revelation in Scripture, expressed in councils of the Church and received by the entire Body of Christ. The new ecclesiology would relegate Scripture to a decidedly marginal role and abolish the conciliar nature of the Orthodox Church.

Despite the consistent emphasis in *The Departure of the Soul* on the unfailling and indeed binding nature of *theoria*-visions as the source of church doctrine, buried deep in the book an unsigned text appears to step back from the sweeping claim of the infallible authority of *theoria*-visions:

Certainly, visions are not accepted as doctrine automatically. Rather, they are revealed to the faithful through Holy Scripture, Ecumenical Councils, liturgical hymnography, theological texts, hagiography, and iconography, and subsequently the *theorias* of the saints are confirmed and received by the consciousness of the Church as Orthodox doctrine manifesting and upholding the truth about God and spiritual realities. (*TDS*, 899)

But this timid acknowledgement of the existence of other sources of authority in Orthodoxy is inconsistent with the main thrust of *The Departure of the Soul* about the infallible and imperative nature of *theoria*-visions on their own, as exposed especially in the Introduction (*TDS*, 35–36). It is as though this passage (*TDS*, 899) had been written by a different author, with no care taken to harmonize the theology here with the rest of the book. In the Introduction and elsewhere in the book, the new ecclesiology of the infallible and imperative authority of *theoria*-visions in the determination of church doctrine is clearly and unambiguously presented, with no mention of Scripture, the hierarchy or councils.

This new ecclesiology has no basis in Scripture, the ecumenical councils, the Fathers of the Church, or modern Orthodox thinking on the Church. It is a false ecclesiology.

The Life of Basil the Younger

The editors of *The Departure of the Soul* have benefitted from the publication in 2014 of a scholarly edition by the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library of the tenth-century Byzantine work, *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger* (or the New) (*LBY*). The editors include in TDS the entire chapter in which Basil's disciple Gregory recounts his *theoria*-vision of the ascent of Basil's faithful servant Theodora through the toll-houses before reaching Basil at an emerald banquet table in Basil's heavenly abode (*TDS*, 370–417). Later in the book, the editors go to great lengths to defend the authenticity of *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger* and to criticize Lev Puhalo for casting doubt on its Orthodoxy (*TDS*, 910–80).

The editors of *The Departure of the Soul* focus exclusively on the first of two *theoria*-visions of Gregory, the celestial post-death journey of Theodora, omitting any mention of the much longer second vision (*LBY*, 365–699). Gregory's second vision is a vast portrait of the celestial Jerusalem, the preparation of the throne of God, the resurrection of the dead, the enthronement of the Lord, and the Last Judgment, with the separation of the elect from the damned. Among those cast into hellfire are apostate Christians, murderers, robbers, adulterers, suicides, thieves, burglars, liars, perjurers, those prone to anger, sinful clerics and monastics, heretics, iconoclasts, and the Jews. The judgment of the Jews is pronounced by God the Father who appears on the scene, vividly pictured in *The Life of Saint Basil the Younger*:

He [God the Father] passed judgment on them and commanded the fearsome angels in charge of the chastisement to lead them away to the fiery Gehenna, which they had prepared for themselves; and the angels, flying in groups like eagles, snatched them up and scattered them over the entire frightening sea of fire. (*LBY*, 633)

According to the new ecclesiology advanced by *The Departure of the*

Soul, Gregory's second vision, including the Last Judgment, should have the same credibility as his first, that of Theodora's passage through the toll-houses, since it too is a "direct divine revelation" (*TDS*, 35) and hence "infallible" (*TDS*, 874). But this second vision contains elements far removed from the teaching of the Orthodox Church, notably Christ's condemnation to hell of entire categories of humanity, and the Jews by God the Father. Orthodox teaching does not envisage the condemnation of categories of persons, but rather stresses divine love, mercy, and forgiveness, as articulated by St Mark of Ephesus at the Council of Ferrara in 1438, with the possible condemnation of individuals on the basis of their own lives, according to the measure of light accorded to each person individually. The dilemma of the editors of *TDS* is clear: if they mention approvingly Gregory's second vision, they would endorse manifestly un-Orthodox teachings; but by rejecting the second vision, they would cast doubt on the validity of the first vision, which constitutes a cornerstone of their whole argument. They cut the Gordian knot by silence concerning the second vision.

The Life of Basil the Younger contains all the marks of an elaborate Byzantine literary construct. It combines hagiography, miracles, descriptions of imperial politics, and social life in mid-tenth-century Constantinople, visions of the afterlife, apocalyptic events, and anti-Semitism into a coherent narrative, likely to appeal to the literate elite of the Byzantine Empire. But there is no independent corroboration that Basil, Gregory, and Theodora were even real persons (*LBY*, 13–14).

Additional Perspectives on Toll-House Theology

The Departure of the Soul includes a carefully selected sample of the writings produced at the time of the original controversy over toll-houses in the early 1980s—those materials which stress the reality of the toll-houses and their presence in the Orthodox tradition. The editors of the book omit material which considers the toll-house narratives as dream, allegory, or symbol, or which denies the dogmatic or doctrinal nature of toll-house teaching. To place the debate in its proper historical context and to assess the claims

advanced by the editors of the *TDS*, it is necessary to look again at some of the material that they have ignored.

The exclusion of material which casts the slightest doubt on the reality of the toll-house narrative can be illustrated by the citations of Fr Michael Pomazansky (1882–1982) of Holy Trinity Seminary included in *The Departure of the Soul*. In his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Pomazansky reports on the existence of the toll-house narrative in several Fathers of the Church and in the *Life of St Basil the New*.⁸ The extract in *TDS* from Pomazansky's book ends with the sentence "The path of the soul after its departure from the body is customarily called the 'toll-houses'" (*TDS*, 283). In the following sentence, omitted from *TDS*, Pomazansky quotes approvingly from Metropolitan Macarius Bulgakov (1816–1882) in his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (c. 1850), who concludes: "One must picture the tollhouses as far as possible in a spiritual sense, which is hidden under the more or less sensuous and anthropomorphic features."⁹

In the next paragraph, also excluded from *TDS*, Pomazansky quotes from the 1848 *Epistle of the Eastern Patriarchs on the Orthodox Faith* (§ 18):

Concerning the state of the soul after the Particular Judgment, the Orthodox Church teaches thus: We believe that the souls of the dead are in a state of blessedness or torment according to their deeds. After being separated from the body, they immediately pass over either into joy or into sorrow and grief; however, they do not feel either complete blessedness or complete torment. For complete blessedness or complete torment each one receives after the General Resurrection, when the soul is reunited with the body in which it lived in virtue or in vice.¹⁰

This summary of Orthodox theology on the afterlife corresponds closely with that of St Mark of Ephesus at the Council of Ferrara in 1438, with no mention of toll-houses.

8 Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2nd ed., 1994), 334; cited in *TDS*, 282–83.

9 Cited in Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 334. *TDS* includes the quotation from Macarius Bulgakov on page 256.

10 Cited in Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 334–35.

In an essay specifically on the toll-houses (reprinted in later editions of his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*), Fr Michael Pomazansky writes:

The subject of the toll-houses is not specifically a topic of Orthodox Christian theology: it is not a dogma of the Church in the precise sense, but comprises material of a moral and edifying character, one might say pedagogical.¹¹

The editors omit this key sentence from the selections of Pomazansky's essay in *The Departure of the Soul* (283–85), no doubt because the sentence undermines their argument. The sentence comes immediately after his quoted words "It is our duty to respond," and is signified by the ellipses (...) (283).

Nor do the editors of *TDS* refer to other writings of Pomazansky which also shed a different light on the canonical status of toll-house theology, emphasizing the symbolic nature of toll-house narratives. Referring to the account by Gregory concerning his vision of Theodora in *The Life of Basil the Younger*, Pomazansky writes:

But of course this dream is allegorical and is made up of a series of symbols. We are earthly, and we cannot speak of heavenly things with any other language than our earthly tongue; we do not know the tongues of angels.¹²

In response to a letter of then Dn Lev Puhalo concerning the prayers for the dead, Fr Michael Pomazansky comments on the status of the narrative of Gregory concerning the journey of Theodora beyond the grave:

Let us reply that all this is expressed as a dream, the dream of the disciple of Basil the New, and it is given as an account of what the disciple saw in this dream. Our dreams are also in the form of real and earthly images. And at the same time

11 Michael Pomazansky, "On the Question of the 'Toll-Houses' Our War is not Against Flesh and Blood," in Michael Pomazansky, *Selected Essays* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1996), 232–41. <http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/tollhouse_pomaz.aspx> (10.06.2017).

12 "Response of Fr Michael Pomazansky to the Letter of Deacon Lev Puhalo concerning the Prayers for the Dead" <<http://web.archive.org/web/20090122195907/http://new-ostrog.org/pomazansky.html>> (27.06.2017).

our dreams can be allegorical. They can express our emotional state, our imagination, and often our illness both of body and soul, dressing them in the form of living beings.

It is noteworthy that Pomazansky does not hesitate to refer to the toll-house account as a “dream” and “allegorical,” relating it to the state of the person dreaming, rather than a “direct divine revelation,” as do the editors of *The Departure of the Soul* (35). Thus Fr Michael Pomazansky exhibits a wise caution concerning the toll-houses, emphasizing that they are allegorical dreams which do not represent church dogma. The careful selection of Pomazansky’s writings on toll-houses contained in *TDS* distorts and misrepresents his thinking.

In a 1984 text, Fr Stanley Harakas (b. 1932), then Dean of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary, replied briefly to four questions put by a reader of *The Hellenic Chronicle*, concluding as follows:

Q. 1: Does the soul linger near the body or earth for the first three days?

SH: Though this is a commonly held opinion among Mediterranean peoples, including the Greek people, it finds no answer in the formal teaching of doctrine in the Orthodox Church ... Since there is no clear doctrinal teaching regarding it, there is no reason why we would have to accept it.

Q. 2: Is the soul met by angels at the moment of death?

SH: Most doctrinal treatments of angelology with which I am familiar, do not support this as a formal teaching of the Orthodox Church.

Q. 3: Are prayers and almsgiving able to bring relief to the souls of the deceased?

SH: This is clearly the teaching of the Orthodox Church. We do not know what kind of relief, or to what extent our prayers can help the deceased ...

On toll-houses, Harakas writes that

the overwhelming doctrinal teaching of the Church does not see these statements as anything more than rhetorical devices.

“Toll houses,” at most, might be called a *theologoumenon* (that is, an optional theological opinion).¹³

One of the “ancillary authors” attacked in *The Departure of the Soul* is Shawn McAvoy, for some of his views in his book *Demonic Trials and Whispers: An Inquiry into the Origins of Logismoi and the Telōnia* (McAvoy uses the transliterated Greek *telōnia* to refer to toll-houses). McAvoy sets out to trace the earliest appearances of key elements in toll-house narratives. He identifies these elements as the “gatekeepers,” the “heavenly ascent,” and the “aerial demons,” in pre-Christian sources in ancient Egypt, Greek philosophy, and Canaanite and Hebrew mythology. McAvoy’s central thesis is that these elements found their way into Christian thought in Egypt (Alexandria), notably through an apocryphal text, the second/third century *Apocalypse of Paul*,¹⁴ and were dramatically reflected in writings such as St Athanasius of Alexandria’s *Life of Anthony* (early fourth century), in the contested work ascribed to St Cyril of Alexandria entitled “On the Departure of the Soul,” and in the “Sermon on Death and Judgement” of St Theophilus of Alexandria (McAvoy, 135–38).

The *Departure of the Soul* attacks McAvoy’s treatment of the toll-house narrative because he repeats material from Lazar Puhalo, because he omits references to certain hagiographic sources which refer to the toll-houses, and because he “disregards the Orthodox Church’s teaching that these visions of the Holy Prophets [of the Old Testament] are revelations from God and not myths and legends” (*TDS*, 880).

McAvoy approaches his subject from the scholarly perspective of tracing the historical and literary predecessors of the *telōnia-*

13 Stanley Harakas in *The Hellenic Chronicle* (December 6, 1984). <http://web.archive.org/web/20090122195907/http://new-ostrog.org/tollhouseletter.html> (27.06.2017).

14 The *Apocalypse of Paul* is a third-century Gnostic text of New Testament apocrypha, known as a forgery from ancient times. The *Apocalypse of Paul*, an expanded version of Paul’s account of his heavenly ascent in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4, contains the notions of the heavenly ascent, the gatekeepers and the heavenly vision, but not demonic trials at toll-houses. Text in James Keith Elliott, tr. & ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 616–44.

toll-house narrative, and not as direct divine revelations to pious Christians, the perspective of the editors of *TDS*. Although McAvoy considers a wide range of material, his scholarship remains incomplete. For example, he likely downplays—as do the editors of *TDS*—the importance of Jewish mythology as an element contributing to the toll-house narrative, and he underestimates the significance of the early appearance of the narrative in Origen (mid-third century, thus after or contemporary with the *Apocalypse of Paul*, but before Theophilus and Athanasius—see Origen's *Homilies on Luke*, 23, 6).

McAvoy points out that the *Life of Basil the Younger* was only one of several apocalyptic narratives dating from the tenth century; others include the *Vision of Kosmas the Monk*, the *Apocalypse of Anastasia*, and the *Vision of Daniel*, the first two of which contain narratives of the afterlife similar to that in *Basil* (McAvoy, 159). *TDS* mentions none of this parallel contemporary middle-Byzantine literature recounting other visions of the afterlife, which was clearly a popular theme at the time.

Despite the critique in *The Departure of the Soul* of certain elements of McAvoy's study pertaining to the transmission of the toll-house narrative, his major thesis stands until it can be disproven by more rigorous studies: that key components of the toll-house narrative as found in non-Christian sources predate or were contemporary with the first appearances of the narrative in early Christian literature.

The book *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy and Art* by Vasileios Marinis was published in April 2017, too late to be considered by the editors of *TDS*. Marinis, a scholar of Christian art and architecture at Yale University, includes a vastly wider range of relevant sources on Byzantine thinking on the afterlife than *The Departure of the Soul*, emphasizing especially the diversity of ideas about the afterlife in late antiquity (Marinis, 15–27), and the Byzantine doctrine of the afterlife at the Council of Ferrara in 1438, as expressed by St Mark of Ephesus (Marinis, 76–80). In the light of his exhaustive study of Byzantine writings and art on the afterlife, Marinis concludes that

For all their reputed and professed preoccupation with the afterlife, the Byzantines never produced a systematic theology on the postmortem fate of the soul. Or, rather, they did so only in the fifteenth century, under duress at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, whose goal was the union of the Byzantine and Latin Churches. One of the main reasons for this late date is the relatively meager and sometimes contradictory information that the Bible provides on the matter. In neither the Old nor the New Testament do we find a fully developed description of the afterlife. (Marinis, 4)

Marinis emphasizes the diversity of views concerning the afterlife in Byzantine thought, a situation facilitated by the absence of clear indications in Scripture and Church doctrine:

Unrestrained by conciliar decrees and with little guidance from Scripture, authors picked and chose whatever story suited their purpose; for the same reasons they felt free to add and subtract, merge elements from different traditions, or even ignore them altogether. (Marinis, 14)

Marinis stresses the importance of the Council of Ferrara in 1438 in the elaboration of a coherent Orthodox theology of the afterlife, presenting a useful summary of the debates at Ferrara (Marinis, 76–80). He notes that the Orthodox position at the Council included neither the idea of a provisional judgment nor a passage through toll-houses, which “was dangerously close to the [Latin] idea of purgatory” (Marinis, 79). Like McAvoy, Marinis traces the origin of the developed toll-house narrative to early Christian Egypt, influenced primarily by Jewish apocalyptic literature. The Jewish apocalyptic texts, writes Marinis, “were the primary influence on Early Christian and, consequentially, Byzantine beliefs [on the afterlife of souls]” (Marinis, 10). Unlike McAvoy, Marinis mentions only Jewish and Greek precedents, omitting reference to other pre-Christian antecedents in Ancient Egypt and Canaan. He also stresses the importance of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, but the Greek and Latin versions rather than the abbreviated Coptic version which McAvoy highlights (Marinis, 11–14; 16–17). Marinis does not seem to have been

aware of McAvoy's work, which is not mentioned or included in an otherwise extensive bibliography (Marinis, 167–89). Like McAvoy, though, Marinis also identifies later popular middle Byzantine texts, such as the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos* and the *Apocalypse of Anastasia*, contemporary with the *Life of Basil the Younger*, as “offspring” of the *Apocalypse of Paul* (Marinis, 13–14).

Conclusion

Fr Seraphim Rose is frequently cited as an authority on the afterlife experiences of souls. Although Rose presents the toll-house narrative in his book *The Soul after Death*, this is not the main thrust of his book, which concerns more broadly an Orthodox assessment of the then-contemporary (1980) fascination with near-death and after-death experiences in the United States. He was in fact very cautious concerning the significance of the toll-house narratives, warning in particular against a rational or literal interpretation as distinct from a metaphorical or spiritual interpretation. At the beginning of the his discussion of the toll-houses, he writes:

The modern rationalistic over-emphasis on the “literal” meaning of texts and a “realistic” or this-worldly understanding of the events described in Scripture and in Lives of Saints—have tended to obscure or even blot out entirely the spiritual meanings and spiritual experiences which are often primary in Orthodox sources.¹⁵

Like Fr Michael Pomazansky, Rose quotes approvingly from the nineteenth-century textbook of dogmatic theology by Metropolitan Macarius of Moscow: “One must picture the toll-houses not in a sense that is crude and sensuous, but—as far as possible for us—in a spiritual sense.”¹⁶

Rose then states that both the toll-house and many near-death experiences belong to the category of “out-of-body” experiences, as distinct from “visions of the other world.” Rose rejects any crudely materialistic and literal meaning of the toll-house narratives:

15 Rose, *The Soul after Death*, 75.

16 Cited in Rose, *The Soul after Death*, 67.

Thus, of course, there are no visible “houses” or “booths” in the air where “taxes” are collected, and where there is mention of “scrolls” or writing implements whereby sins are recorded, or “scales” by which virtues are weighed, or “gold” by which “debts” are paid—in all such cases we may properly understand these images to be figurative or interpretative devices used to express the spiritual reality which the soul faces at that time.

Unfortunately, the editors of *The Departure of the Soul* have not followed Fr Seraphim Rose’s sound advice about the interpretation toll-house narratives. Although in one place the editors of *TDS* refer to the *theoria*-visions of the trial of the soul at toll-houses as “spiritual realities ... expressed in material words and images,” and as “symbols” and “veils” (*TDS*, 38), the many hundreds of pages devoted to the *theoria*-visions and to their defense against Orthodox and non-Orthodox critics all support a literal and realistic understanding of the toll-houses, with demons and angels as prosecutors and attorneys at the successive trials of the soul.

One of the academic endorsements tucked away at the back of the book is a very direct and unambiguous statement by Fr Vasile Raduca, Dean Emeritus of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the University of Bucharest, who correctly expresses the status of Orthodox teaching on the afterlife: “The Church has not formulated any dogmas regarding the soul’s departure for the afterlife, and what follows afterwards” (*TDS*, 1,101). The editors of *The Departure of the Soul* implicitly reject this assessment but instead go to great lengths to advance a new ecclesiology whereby Orthodox doctrines repose on *theoria*-visions without the need for conciliar discernment and reception by the body of the Church.

The editors of *The Departure of the Soul* fail to distinguish between canonically-expressed and duly-received dogmas of the Orthodox Church and the content of the tradition of the Orthodox Church. Orthodox tradition is much broader than proclaimed dogmas, but does not have the same authority. Toll-house imagery and symbolism is certainly within the Orthodox tradition—*The Departure of the Soul* eloquently demonstrates this—but it is not the sole strand of

Orthodox thinking on the afterlife. It is not unusual in Orthodoxy to have different and even apparently overlapping elements within the overall tradition, on matters on which there exist no formal church dogmas. It is thus misleading and erroneous to present toll-house theology as “the teaching of the Orthodox Church,” when in reality it is only part of a wider Orthodox tradition concerning the afterlife. As we mentioned at the beginning of this review, the only portions of the Orthodox tradition concerning the afterlife which have canonical status are contained in the Nicene Creed: that Christ “will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead”; and “I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” Any teachings beyond this have far less authority, even though such teachings may fall within the broad tradition of the Church.

In conclusion, an anthology of patristic, hagiographic and other writings, however numerous, attesting to the toll-house narrative does not establish a doctrine or teaching of the Orthodox Church, nor can such an anthology become a substitute for the proclamation of doctrine or teaching by a duly-constituted conciliar authority, and received by the body of the Church. The new ecclesiology of *The Departure of the Soul* would abolish the primacy of Scripture and the conciliarity of the Orthodox Church and replace them with the *theoria*-visions of saints and elders. This ecclesiology is unsustainable in the Orthodox tradition. While toll-house narratives may serve a useful pedagogical or pastoral role, toll-house theology is not the teaching of the Orthodox Church; it is the personal theological opinion (*theologumenon*) of a large number of Fathers and elders of the Church, but it has never been formally proclaimed by the Orthodox Church and received as a doctrine or teaching by the body of Church.