

Law Without Grace: The Problems with the Toll House Theory

Matthew Raphael Johnson
Johnstown, PA

The Aerial Toll-House debate is strange only in that it derives from a dream, and a bizarre one at that. The dreamer is not a saint and his actual identity is open to dispute. The sequence of events is related in the text *The Tale of Theodora and the Aerial Toll-Houses*.¹ St. Theodora lived in Constantinople during the 10th century. A widow, she became a nun under St. Basil the New and became a solitary. When she reposed at a great age, Gregory, a student, asked Basil to speak of the saintly nun's ascent to heaven.²

This Gregory fell asleep that night, and “a youth of comely appearance came to him.” This is supposed to be an angel. He said to “Come quickly, Father Basil summons you to visit Theodora.” He quickly followed the angel, while asleep, and soon found himself in a labyrinth. Such a labyrinth is an ancient symbol of Gnostic initiation (see more below). In addition, Julius Evola argues that “Toll Gates” are an essential and foundational element of Mithratic Initiation. Variations of the “toll gates” are discovered in most non- and pre-Christian movements.

He came upon a bolted gateway, and he yelled through a keyhole to an unidentified woman there, who informed him that this is where Fr. Basil speaks with his “children.” Gregory is depicted as banging on the door, demanding to be let in. This is hardly the monastic way. Then, Theodora arrives and begins to tell Gregory about the Toll Houses.

Why did the author(s) see fit to include the labyrinth and his banging on the door, demanding to be let in? From the first few paragraphs this cannot be an Orthodox document. Gregory, the student, is reputed to be actually Gregory of Thrace, a Gnostic, and this Tale doesn't show up in St. Theodora's early biographies. Its a forgery.

Normally, dreams are not considered sources for doctrine. Even the dream of Joseph warning him about the upcoming slaughter of innocents was no dream at all. It was less a dream manufactured by the mind and more a direct communication while asleep. The angel made it very clear it was no dream.

Put in the simplest terms, The Toll Houses are mini-court proceedings where the soul after death must pass through to ascend to Heaven. Each Toll specializes in a specific sin. Demons argue as the prosecution, while good angels defend the soul. If a sin remains without its corresponding repentance, the soul is dragged to Hell. Demons and the good angels meet together as equals. This is crystal clear from the beginning.

In modern times, this theory was developed by the great Fr. Seraphim Rose of Platina, California. Fr. Seraphim was a great man and missionary, but like all of us, made some errors. This one shouldn't harm our view of his work as a whole. My esteem for Fr. Seraphim remains untouched.

1 This paper refers to it as The “Dream” the “Tale” as a shorthand. They all refer to the same text. It should also be noted that this author doesn't use “St Theodora” due to the fact that she had nothing to do with it. It is not an Orthodox document.

2 The full Tale can be found at the Orthodox Christian Information Center:
<http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/theodora.aspx>).

When I first heard about the Toll House theory, I was still a Traditional Roman Catholic and Uniat struggling to see a parallel to Purgatory. Apparently, the soul-stripping suffering we're subject to in this life isn't sufficient to remove the guilt from our sins. More must be added on at death. God extracts each ounce of suffering he can as his wounded ego is healed, somehow, by our cries.

The sufferings of this life are almost all the result of sin and thus, we're granted forgiveness in line with our pain. In other words, sin contains its own punishment. This is quite different from a Purgation in the papal sense. Purgatory is unneeded because sin itself is painful. Purgatory is our life – to say the least. Those who don't suffer – and I know of several individuals who have never suffered in their lives – don't know how to call out to God. They don't know how to pray or rely on him. They're lost.

Today, many years later, I've come to reject the theory for a different reason. The Tolls are a legalistic, judicial proceeding and thus, can only be false doctrine. The Toll theory diminishes in utility to the extent it is seen as “metaphorical.” Claiming this is all an allegory only begs the question. Why these symbols? Is the dream real or not? It must speak to some reality for it to be doctrine. Doctrine cannot be metaphorical. Dogma and canon law are not poetic exercises.

The patristic writings in favor of this theory only indirectly suggest a “Toll House.” A soul struggling with demons after death is hardly a foundation for this entire idea of a standardized legal procedure. There are no direct references to it outside the dreams. Often, what appear to be references to them actually refer to any battle of the soul with demons.

Orthodox people are under the impression that patristic writers are infallible oracles. Their contemporaries certainly didn't think so. Their every word is not the Gospel. They make errors and are carried away by passion just like any other man. When they're attacking a doctrine, they can go too far to make a point. Context is everything.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, a great saint and monastic legislator, writes:

In the layers of the under-heaven, from earth to heaven itself, stand guarding legions of fallen spirits. Each division is in charge of a special form of sin and tests the soul in it when the soul reaches this division. The aerial demonic guards and judgment places are called in the Patristic writings the toll houses, and the spirits who serve in them are called the tax-collectors.³

This suggests the Tolls are real things, though even defenders of the theory reject any literal interpretation. It might also be noted that St. Ignatius condemns taking any doctrine from dreams in his *Arena*. Generally, he says to reject dreams as either from our own minds or, at worst, from demons. Why is this dream given privileged status? Worse, there are so many versions of the theory not a single one states the issue in the same way.

We're often fearful of death. Because we can't really know what comes from beyond the grave – since our language could never describe it – man has a tendency to speculate on it. St. Ignatius writes in his “Homily on Death” where he clarifies his views on the Tolls:

Every trial experiences its own sins; every sin, every passion has its prosecutors and tormentors. What kind of fear, trepidation and anxiety the soul must feel, seeing all this, until the final verdict is pronounced! [This is a] Painful, distressed, full of groaning, inconsolable hour of indecision. The forces of heaven stand

3 Quoted from Fr. Seraphim's *Soul After Death* (St. Herman Press, 1980)

against the face of impure spirits and contend with the good thoughts, words and deeds belonging to the soul, and [the soul], in fear and trembling among the angels and demons fighting for her, awaits either her pardon and liberation, or condemnation and perdition. If [the soul] spent its life piously and God-pleasing and became worthy of salvation, then the Angels welcome it, and it is already walking calmly to God, having the companions of the Holy Powers.⁴

This removes any literalism from the theory. What he writes here is just a poetic way to describe the fact that sin contains its own punishment. He's referring to the conscience here, not demonic District Attorneys. Demons and "divine forces" are not equal. They cannot stand against each other and "argue" for the destiny of the soul. Again, Christ and the Theotokos are still absent. There is no mercy, only the weighing of deeds good and bad. This is the opposite of Christianity and makes the Cross of no effect.

The Toll Houses, according to some versions of the theory, exist only for those sins that have not been confessed. Therefore, it can only apply to things the sufferer has done since their last confession. Yet, the vision states that "Then the shameless spirits began to recount everything that the saint had done from her youth, whether by word, or deed or thought. To all this they added much of their own invention, seeking to slander the saint." So sins that have been confessed are listed here as well.

Later on, however, it says that confessed sins are invisible to demons. Then how could they list all the rotten things she did from birth onward? The context is that the demons speak the truth, but they add more to exaggerate the sinfulness of the soul. Therefore, demons can see everything.

The implications of this are staggering. It implies that confession is the only means of expiating sin. It turns the faith into a giant accounting machine. It's the papal error of indulgences and created grace. The Toll theory sees sin only as specific acts and not the general disorder of soul that produces the acts. It takes too much from legal practice in the secular world. It's not even good to use it as a metaphor since it destroys any concept of mercy. Metaphors are meant to illumine, not mislead.

The radicalism of the church is often dulled by repetition. Sin doesn't violate the law of God in some penal sense. It harms our own ascent and forbids our transformation. Archbishop Lev Puhalo, a contentious and controversial bishop, says, describing the legalistic conception of sin in the Dream:

If a man did not manage to expiate enough to satisfy this god in this life, then he must somehow expiate after death. Even if a person is "saved," he must be purged by aerial trials of his legal guilt, and can only pass through this purgation if he has sufficient good works to cover his items of legal guilt. He may also pass through this purgation if his spiritual father has enough excess merits that he can use to buy his way through this aerial gauntlet. Sins paid for are not forgiven because punishment and forgiveness are mutually exclusive. Thus we see that the forensic concept of sin, together with any dualistic notion of the nature of man, is heretical.⁵

4 Ibid

5 Puhalo, L. (2007) The Nature of Sin. Clarion

Sins are not forgiven in confession as some sort of liturgical mechanism that wipes the soul clean of its evil acts. This is false theology that leads to blind, positivist rule following. This is the whole point of the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. Great evil can be done without ever violating the canons. The Talmud is one great means of manipulating words so as to get around the law. Its the result of rule following theology.

Confessing sins is the relationship between spiritual fathers and sons, not a machine for instant forgiveness of wrongdoing. This is not what “repentance” means. Sacraments are visible signs of grace that already exists. They are not a conjuring of God's power by the initiated priest-craft. This is one of the easiest heresies to fall into, but it can be deadly.

The ROCOR issued a statement on Lev Puhalo and the Toll House theory in 1980. They state, quoting from the 1848 *Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs*: “In connection with this there is the reservation that when we say that God does not ask of us an accounting for our life, this must be understood in the sense that we shall be given an accounting not in the manner of human accountings.”⁶ The obvious question is why use such a term when the bishops admit its misleading? Bishop Puhalo adds to this:

We are not saved by having more “good points” than “bad points,” and we certainly do not enter the Heavenly Kingdom by becoming “sinless,” since then, no one, not even the saints, would enter...It is our struggle against temptations and passions, in order to acquire the Holy Spirit, which saves us. . . . The essence of sin should also not be understood as a contravention of God's will in a legalistic sense, nor to fall below a given norm of behavior. To sin means to violate God's will in this sense, that “God wills all men to be saved.” Sin means to fall short of the destiny (*mark, goal*) for which man was created. Since the “goal,” “destiny” and “mark” for which man was created is full communion with God, to partake of the Divine Nature (2 Pet.1:4), sharing in His glory and immortality, then “sin” (*as a noun*) means to fall short of the destiny of theosis. . . . “Sins” are those things we do which openly manifest and reinforce our separation from God, or “falling short.”⁷

Punishment is not from God, but is rather inherent in natural law: sin, for those in the church, contains inherent suffering. Sin is inherently evil even if it brings great surface benefit to the sinner. Sin, as Plato says in the *Gorgias*, is deadly even if the sinner is rewarded handsomely for his sin. It inherently fights against human nature regardless of its external results.

Jurretta Heckscher, in an unpublished essay, states something similar:

God's justice, as St. Isaac the Syrian says, has almost nothing to do with human justice; what is “just” about His sacrificial love for us? What is “just” about the halting and reluctant steps of the Prodigal being met by the outpouring of forgiveness and generosity from his father? One thinks also of the profound Russian folktale Dostoevsky recounts in *The Brothers Karamazov*, about the woman in Hell who was almost released from it because she had once shared an onion with a beggar – but at the last minute she claimed the onion as hers

6 The OCIC, referenced above, has the entire discussion here:
http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/tollhouse_debate.aspx

7 Puhalo, L (2016) Gehenna: The Orthodox Christian Doctrine about Judgment and Hell, from the Tradition and Holy Fathers. Synaxis Press (these are two quotations spaced greatly apart).

exclusively, and so slipped back into Hell. Such an understanding turns the toll-house belief on its head: the toll houses tell us that one unrepentant sin is enough to damn us; the Gospels, St. Isaac (among many others), and the theological wisdom of traditional Russian culture tell us that God seeks endlessly to find some way to save us, and suggest that one spontaneous act of love or repentance can give Him the lever He longs to find to release us into His mercy. How can these two beliefs be reconciled?⁸

Heckscher summarizes the whole argument against the theory. Few will be saved in its theology. Death is horror and terror and almost certain damnation. Demons become the mediator of an abstract (and absent) God who rules by strict justice, not mercy. They possess the soul inherently, while good angels “argue” to get it back. Its clear in the Dream that even the holy Theodora's soul is possessed by the demons and the angel must fight for it. It states:

When the holy angels had the soul of the nun, the evil spirits returned saying, “We have a list of her many sins, answer for them.” Then the angels began to recount all the good deeds which the saint had done: her charity, her love of peace, her love for the temple of God, her patience, humility, fasting, and many other ascetic deeds which the nun had accomplished in life. They set her good deeds opposite her sins, which expiated them.

Assuming a correct translation, this is not Orthodoxy. Since when can demons demand anything from good angels and be heeded? Here, they have power over the good angels and force them to give an account of Theodora's deeds. Worse, that the very nature of the expiation of sin is that the good deeds outweigh the bad in this courtroom existing just a few feet above our heads. When it is decided that the good points outweigh the bad, the bad are removed. What sort of doctrine is this?

According to Theodora's alleged vision:

Still, even the gluttonous can be saved. Those of them that are merciful and kindhearted to needy and beggars and help those who ask for help—such men can easily obtain from God forgiveness of their sins, and because of their kindheartedness toward their neighbors, pass the stations of torment without stopping. It is said in the Scripture: alms save from death and cleanse every kind of sin; those who give alms and do justice will be filled with life (Tobit 12:9). But he who does not strive to cleanse his sins by good deeds cannot escape the dark tormentors who lead the sinners down to hell and hold them bound until the terrible judgment at Christ's Second Coming. You too would not have escaped here your evil lot, were it not that you have received the treasure of [your spiritual father's] prayers.

This is dangerously close to the idea of supererogatory merits. This is truly papal doctrine. This also implies that demons are autonomous forces. This is a grave error since all is under God's control. During the end times, God might grant demons some freedom, but this doesn't free them from God's plan for humanity. Demons would love humanity to believe they

8 From the “Monachos” forums. <http://www.monachos.net/conversation/topic/325-toll-houses/page-2>

are free and thus, equal to God.

There is another problem with the Dream. It describes heaven this way:

We entered a palace decorated with gold. In its midst there were various trees that bore splendid fruit. When I looked east I saw luxurious halls, light and high. There was a large table on which stood golden vessels; they looked very expensive and were wondrous to look at. In the vessels were vegetables of all sorts, and fragrance issued from them

This is an excessively material, almost Islamic conception of heaven. St. Paul says we cannot describe what heaven is, but the recounting of a dream that is then recounted on paper later can? “Looking very expensive” is an extremely crude way to see heaven. It might be how a poor soul might see it as he laments his poverty. According to this, the very rich already live in heaven. This cannot be true and would be a very poor and misleading allegory.

Finally, the end of the Tale shows St. Basil asking Gregory to write down all he remembers about the Dream. Gregory was very upset that this might be demonic delusion. The Tale doesn't say one way or another if that's correct, only that Basil wanted this written down for “the benefit of others.” The very fact, first, that Gregory is upset by this dream suggests its not from God and second, that the doctrine is based on Gregory's memory of a dream is bizarre. Dreams are notorious to remember in detail, let alone the immense detail this one entails. Its an absurd basis for detailed doctrine.

The liturgical history of the church is saturated with ideas that the demons have been defeated. They have no more power. God rules over all and Satan has been despoiled. Man has been liberated. Nature has been transformed and no separation exists between God and man. Now, we see demons in charge of judging souls that have been baptized and sealed in chrisimation. They make demands on good angels. Even holy souls are possessed by them at death.

When St. Anthony lived in the Egyptian tombs, demons came to trick him, to tempt him in various ways. They had no power over him. He mocked them directly as they changed shape. He debated with them, made fun of them and almost enjoyed their pathetic attempts to seem “powerful.”

This shows the obvious truth that demons have no power at all except to manipulate men with fantasies. Demons show us a vision of a woman loving us, a mansion, respect from peers or something else we desire and we then pursue these ends at the expense of virtue. Even when we gain these things, they're never what we thought and never match the fantasy. Otherwise, demons do nothing but make noise.

St. John Chrysostom says:

And in testimony of this we brought forward the swine, against which the Demons were unable to venture anything, before the permission of the Master; the herds and flocks of Job. For not even did the Devil venture to destroy these, until he received power from above. We learned therefore this one thing first, that he does not overcome us by force, or by compulsion; next after that, we added that even when he overcomes by deceitfulness, not thus does he get the better of all

men.⁹

Thus, demons are under God's power, something that torments them greatly. Satanism as a religion preaches that Satan and God are equals and thus, good and evil are equally useful. Following one is just as good as the other. Yet, we read “We ought not to fear the demons or even Satan himself, for he is a liar and speaks not a word of truth...and with him are placed the demons, his fellows, like serpents and scorpions to be trodden underfoot by us Christians” by St. Anthony in Athanasius' famed *Biography*.

When Christ sent the demons into the herd of pigs (Matthew 8:31), He proved their weakness. In this regard, the great saint says, “But if the demons had power not even against the swine, much less have they any over men formed in the image of God. So then we ought to fear God only, and despise the demons, and be in no fear of them.”

St. John Chrysostom states that if we were punished in the way of strict justice for all of our sins, we'd be long dead. In his “Second Homily on Lazarus,” he says, “For if while the soul dwells in the body the devil cannot bring violence about it, clearly when it departs from the body, he likewise has no power over it.” Therefore, the Toll theory is false or, at best, misleading.

The assumption that people are “worthy” of salvation is the error of rule following theology. None of us, no one alive, is worthy of salvation and none of can pass though these “Toll Houses.” Not one of us. That mercy is absent seems to be explicitly stated by Fr. Seraphim in *Soul after Death*:

Justice itself demands that these inclinations to sin, these betrayals of the Redeemer should be weighed and evaluated. A judging and distinguishing are required in order to define the degree of a Christian soul's inclination to sin, in order to define what predominates in it – eternal life or eternal death.

If this is true, then no flesh will be saved. Fr. Seraphim is laying out a foundation for a quantitative, operationalized conception of human motivation that then would serve as the grounds for judging one's worthiness. This is the opposite of mercy. The sufferings in the Garden and the Cross have taken care of these elements of “justice.” That was the whole point of His taking all the sins of the world on himself and enduring their collective pain to the point where the capillaries under his skin burst under the strain, causing him to “sweat blood.”¹⁰ He was the substitute for what we deserved. Justice was already satisfied on and in Christ.

In a letter to Simeon of Caesarea, St. Isaac the Syrian says this:

This convicts the false writings called “revelations” which, being composed by the originators of the corrupt heresies under the influence of demonic fantasies, describe the celestial dwelling in the sky...the pathways to Heaven, the places set apart for judgment, the manifold figures of the hosts of the sky, and their diverse activities. But all these things are shadows of a mind inebriated by conceit and deranged by the working of demons.¹¹

9 Quoted from Puhalo, *Gehenna: The Orthodox Christian Doctrine about Judgment and Hell, from the Tradition and Holy Fathers* (Synaxis Press, 2016)

10 Scientifically, this is called Hematidrosis.

11 Quoted from Puhalo, *Gehenna: The Orthodox Christian Doctrine about Judgment and Hell, from the Tradition and Holy Fathers* (Synaxis Press, 2016)

This is certainly strong evidence against the theory. The vulgarity of the literal “pathway” comes from simple minds, if not “deranged” ones. It is easy to say this is all “metaphorical,” but this only makes the matter more confusing. Most writers on this topic see these Houses as literal things, though calling them “Tolls” might be a bit of poetic license. They are still misleading.

Fr. Seraphim doesn't see the Toll Houses as metaphor, but he was no “Gnostic.” Gnostics weren't so crude as to believe in *Archons* who “seize” the soul. Gnosticism is based on the manipulation of the written word. The tradition is only oral, while writing is deliberately misleading. Words don't mean the same as they do in normal speech. You cannot take their speculations literally. Above, I mentioned the labyrinth, which is rare in patristic literature, but is an ancient Gnostic symbol.

The ancient Cretan Labyrinth contained seven paths which correspond to seven planets. Getting through the maze to the center is a symbol for enlightenment, a journey of self-discovery common among later Masons. It is a quest for truth. The Cretan version derives from this myth:

The Labyrinth was designed as a dwelling for, or at any rate was inhabited by, a hideous and cruel being called the Minotaur, a monstrous offspring of Queen Pasiphaë, wife of Minos. The Minotaur is described as being half man and half bull, or a man with a bull's head, a ferocious creature that destroyed any unfortunate human beings who might come within its power. According to report, the youths and maidens of the Athenian tribute were periodically, one by one, thrust into the Labyrinth, where, after futile wanderings in the endeavor to find an exit, they were finally caught and slain by the Minotaur.¹²

The Minotaur represents the “demons” that the adolescent must overcome to become an adult. Nicole Tessmer of St. Louis University summarizes the myth:

According to ancient mythology, King Minos built a perplexing labyrinth to house the Minotaur, a monstrous creature to which his wife had given birth. Each year, the myth states, seven girls and seven boys were chosen to enter the labyrinth as tributes to become food for the Minotaur. It was not until Theseus entered the labyrinth, and killed the Minotaur that it could be considered a place to leave your childhood behind. *Once inside, they wrestled with their demons, experienced a rebirth, and finally, emerged as adults ready to take their places in society.* The myth of the labyrinth can thus be understood as a rite of passage or a coming of age ritual in ancient Greece. It was this mythological labyrinth that Sir Arthur Evans believed he had discovered at the Palace of Knossos, located just a few miles from the city of Heraklion on the island of Crete.¹³

That a labyrinth appears in the early part of the *Tale of Theodora* suggests that the initial writer of the tale was initiated. The medieval symbol of the labyrinth was fairly well known, especially among Greek speakers, though Egypt had several similar versions. Such a device would not be found in Orthodox writings.

12 Mathews, WH (1922) *Mazes and Labyrinths*. Longmans

13 Tessmer, N (2015) *Myth, Ritual, and the Labyrinth of King Minos*. *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*, emphasis mine

In a letter to Bp. Lev Puhalo, Fr. Michael Pomozansky rejects the literal telling of the vision. He states “This dream is of course allegorical and is composed of a series of symbols, symbols which Basil put into a certain order, ... the sins of people into a certain scheme, as this is the generally accepted [practice of] ascetic writers.”

As Fr. Michael Azkoul remarks,

Fr Michael, therefore, interprets “Theodora” as the soul, the angels as being its virtues and the demons as being in reality, its sins. “Both are in the soul of a man and perhaps after death are found, as it were, on the scales of a balance.” Our sins accuse and convict us, the grace of God and our faith save us.¹⁴

This is the only rational interpretation of the Dream. It might be an edifying tale, but not a doctrinal statement. A powerful argument against the theory, as an aside, is that it is not mentioned in any sense in the funeral liturgies and canons of the church. This is – pardon the pun – damnable evidence against it. If its not in the funeral liturgies of the church, it doesn't exist. However, concerning liturgy, Fr. Seraphim Rose engages in creative translation. From the Canon of the Departed:

As I depart from earth, vouchsafe me to pass unhindered by the
prince of the air, the persecutor, the tormenter [sic], he who stands
on the frightful paths and is their unjust interrogator.

Yet, the standard Hapgood translation says this:

O Conqueror and Tormentor of the fierce Prince of the air, O
Guardian of the dread path and Searcher of these vain words,
help Thou me to pass unhindered, as I depart from earth.¹⁵

These two translations have very little in common. Fr. Seraphim's translation cannot be correct since it flies in the face of true doctrine. If Fr. Seraphim is deliberately mistranslating liturgical texts, then these are serious sins. No one is certain, however. Satan has been conquered, therefore, he cannot be the “persecutor” anymore. These translations have little in common.

Works such as *The Exodus (Departure) of the Soul* and attributed to Cyril of Alexandria and occasionally John Chrysostom, are forgeries. Most of the homilies of St. Cyril on life after death are spurious. Makarios of Egypt wrote nothing down. His biographers at the time mentioned this explicitly. Much of the “proof-texts” offered on the Toll House theory are not from legitimate sources and, as we see above, from distorted translations. Seraphim's distortion of the passage from St. Gregory the Dialogist is rank dishonesty. In fact, the overwhelming number of the Fathers avoided the topic of the soul immediately after death altogether.

Fr. Michael states

Fr Seraphim never understood the place of Grace in the Orthodox religion. His toll-house theory proves it. If salvation is becoming like God through Grace; and if this process of salvation or deification begins in the Church, continues into the

14 Azkoul, M (2015) *The Aerial Toll-House Myth: The Neo-Gnosticism of Fr Seraphim Rose*. Synaxis Press

15 Quoted from Azkoul, 2015

next life, what possible role can toll-houses play in God's Plan? How shall the devil and his demons judge His elect? Can they condemn God's Own (1 Pet.2:9)? Can they condemn us? Can they purge our sins? No, all these things are the action of God's Grace.¹⁶

This reason is sufficient to reject the Toll Houses. Its not that they are “neo-Gnostic,” but rather, that God is absent. It is an inversion of the entire faith. God is not a father to his people, but a strict governor who appoints “hanging judges” to ensure the maximum number of people possible are damned.

Fr. Michael is incorrect to say that Seraphim Rose was a “Gnostic.” If he made an error, it was an inadvertent one. Concepts of “God,” “objective truth” or “sins” are totally foreign to actual Gnostic doctrine. Gnostic doctrine, its esoteric idea, is that man is God. All else is for the “cowan,” or the man prior to initiation. They had no doctrine of heaven or hell. It wasn't a religion at all. However, the exoteria of Gnosticism, both in the Chaldean and Egyptian varieties, speaks of the Toll Houses, it is nothing more than a verbal symbol in their cosmology. Most certainly they did not take it literally, since Gnosticism as such is a set of symbols that are gradually decoded and communicated to the initiate as he rises through the degrees.

In the *Apocalypse of James*, the risen Jesus allegedly stated to James,

Behold I shall reveal to you your redemption. When you are seized and you undergo these death pangs, a multitude of Archons will turn against you, that they may seize you. And in particular three of them will seize you, namely, those who sit there as supernatural toll collectors, not only demanding toll, but also taking away souls by force.¹⁷

Again, this is pure exoteria. Gnostics didn't write their doctrines down, and words to them are symbols, not letters that, taken together, denote meaning. Exoteric Gnostic doctrine contains almost every doctrine under the sun, but only the initiate can decode the words.

Fr. Seraphim, normally an excellent missionary, erred in an area that is very speculative and difficult. Fr. Michael is far too harsh and sweeping, when he calls Seraphim a “Gnostic.” Having studied under Allan Watts before his conversion, Seraphim knew the difference between esoteria and exoteria. He knew that rituals and “sacraments” in Gnosticism are only for the uninitiated. It was Fr. Seraphim's devotion to St. John Maximovich which led him to this specific and isolated error.

The arrangement of the Toll Houses in the Dream of Theodora are a powerful argument against the theory as a whole. They make absolutely no sense to an almost comic degree. Consider the 19th Toll House. It deals with heresy.

Thereafter we came to the torment of heresies, where are punished those reasonings about faith which are not right, and also turning away from the Orthodox confession of faith, and lack of faith, doubts about it, denial of holy things or a negative attitude toward them, and other sins of the kind. I passed this torment without being tested; we were no longer far from the gates of Heaven.

16 ibid

17 Quoted from Rudolph, K. (1983) *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Harper

This doesn't make sense on its face, let alone as the "19th Toll House." If one is a heretic, then who go through the other Toll Houses? Such a soul would be doomed regardless of its getting through the first 18. Also, it suggests that virtue is possible without the faith. Why would the most fundamental Toll be near the end? Why test the heretic's actions at all, when his heresy damns him automatically? How can true doctrine be at 19? A similar question might be: why have earlier steps when God knows the soul will fail later? Is this just for added torment?

Why have pride as the 11th Toll? Most of the moral theology of the patristic era places pride as the first of all sins, from which all the others descend. If one is proud, then the soul couldn't possibly have passed the second toll (lying) and the third (gossip and rumors). Proud people do both. The 9th Toll is injustice. How could a proud man have passed that one? Can a proud man pass the envy test? And isn't "idle speech," strangely the First Toll, very similar to spreading rumors and gossip? In fact, isn't that what "idle speech" actually is?

The 14th torment is murder. Are we to believe that a murderer, and an unrepentant one at that, will have passed the previous 13 Tolls without a problem? He's a killer, but is scrupulous about all the other sins? Why make a distinction between fornication and adultery? The 20th Toll is compassion. The cruel cannot pass this one. Yet, somehow, they passed lying, rumor-mongering, pride, envy and holding grudges? After pride, there's the Toll of anger. Proud men are often angry when their honor is violated. Yet, they can be prone to anger and not be proud?

This is the absurdity of this dream of a dream, the foundation of the Toll House theory. It must be rejected on numerous grounds, the most significant of which is the fact that God is nowhere to be found. Salvation is by works in a Roman Catholic sense in that it is "earned." Once you do the right thing, God "owes" you salvation. Demons are granted powers they cannot have. Mercy and grace aren't even mentioned. Finally, the arrangement of the Tolls is haphazard and illogical, suggesting that the author knows little about moral theology.

Fr. Seraphim struggled to find "proof text" for this doctrine. He failed to do so. He relied heavily on the work of St. Makarios the Great. While much of this work is profound, it was not written by the saint. His ancient biographers fail to mention any of his written work at all. It has been theorized that this body of work was written in the 900s by St. Simeon the Logothete, but this remains controversial.¹⁸

The method is problematic. Any quote that seemed to suggest that there are problems with demons after death is taken to mean that the fullness of the Toll House theory is true. However, for a doctrine that Fr. Seraphim called the "touchstone of Orthodoxy," his citations either are very indirect and vague, or else sound very much like it is the conscience, the soul itself, that feels its guilt for sins that went unforgiven. Demons have done nothing but mock and frighten, as they always do, but nothing of substance, since they've been defeated.

Seraphim cited pseudo-Makarios:

When the soul of a man departs out of the body, a great mystery is there accomplished. If it is under the guilt of sins, there come bands of devils, and angels of the left hand, and powers of darkness take over that soul, and hold it fast on their side. No one ought to be surprised at this. If while alive in this world, the man was subject and compliant to them, and made himself their bondman, how much more, when he departs out of this world, is he kept down and held fast

18 See the introduction of Maloney's 1992 translation of Pseudo-Macarius. *The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*. Paulist Press

by them. . .

This is perfectly reasonable and say nothing about the Toll Houses. All this says is that the soul has made its decision and has fashioned itself a demonic identity by attaching itself to the world. The rest of the quote, however, Seraphim leaves out. It says,

That this is the case, you ought to understand from what happens on the good side, God's holy servants even now have angels continually beside them, and the holy spirits encompassing and protecting them; and when they depart out of the body, the bands of angels take over their souls to their own side, into the pure world and so they bring them to the Lord; to Whom be glory and might forever. Amen.¹⁹

In other words, demons can do no more than what they did to St. Anthony: offer frightening images. If the soul is saved, there are no Tolls. If it is not, the Tolls are unnecessary. It seems to be torment for its own sake.

Furthermore, the Toll House theory accepts the crude and puerile idea that God is “up,” and that, literally, the soul goes “up into the air” where it is accosted by demons. Is the soul really floating upwards? To what? It is very unlikely that an educated Pharisee like Paul would use such a crude conception of “air.” In this case, it refers to the world.

The verse is “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:1-2). In the Toll House interpretation, the demons rule the world by ruling the air. They float up there to, it seems, “catch” souls as they float upwards. “Air” doesn't mean “atmosphere.” This is an exceptionally crude way to envisage it.

The ancients used four archetypes to describe the created world: earth, air, fire and water. These weren't an ancient table of elements, but iconic understandings of created objects. The “air” referred to power, communication in the sense of “airwaves” or “in the air,” and intelligence. It refers to all aspects of the spirit, that which is not laden with matter. No one literally believed that this meant demons were floating just above us, “in the atmosphere.”

One of the more depressing aspects of this debate is whether or not the soul, as such, can be judged. This is a simple question that, like much else in the church, has been muddied by a lack of historical and philosophical understanding. First, a human being is not a soul, nor is it a body. It is both. These are not actually distinct until the fall of Adam. Death as a separation of the two is an abomination, since it is so radically unnatural.

The soul, by itself, is not a man. The body by itself is not a man either. Only when they are together do you have a human being. St. Justin the Philosopher says:

But in what instance can the flesh possibly sin by itself, if it have not the soul going before it and inciting it? For as in the case of a yoke of oxen, if one or other is loosed from the yoke, neither of them can plow alone; so neither can soul or body alone effect anything, if they be unyoked from their communion. . . . For, what is man but the rational animal composed of body and soul? Is the soul by itself man? No; but (only) the soul of a man. Would the body be called man? No,

19 Both from Soul after Death, 1980

but it is called (only) the body of a man. If, then, neither of these is by itself man, but that which is made up of the two together is called man, and God has called man to life and resurrection, He has called not a part, but the whole, which is the soul and the body.

This is simple anthropology. St. Ambrose also states the same obvious point:

And this is the course and ground of justice, that since the actions of body and soul are common to both (for what the soul has conceived, the body has carried out)...for it would seem almost inconsistent that...the mind guilty of a fault shared by another should be subjected to penalty, and the flesh, the author of the evil, should enjoy rest: and that that alone should suffer which had not sinned alone, or should attain to glory not having fought alone, with the help of grace.²⁰

This is why there are two judgments. A soul isn't a soul without the body and vice versa. A soul by itself is an unnatural monster akin to calling a corpse a "human man." St. Basil makes clear that the "partial judgment" is merely the removal of the non-Orthodox from heaven. The soul that hasn't been illumined is a defective entity and hence, the mixing of soul and body in man is equally unnatural and unfree. The soul is a created thing as the body is. It is immortal only at the specific command of God.

Without illumination, it isn't free, and partakes of the same nature as matter. St. Basil says: "But there can be no beholding without the Spirit! For just as at night, if you withdraw the light from the house, the eyes fall blind and their faculties become inactive and worth objects cannot be discerned." without baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the soul, it is a mechanical object. Unfree and material at its root.

Free will is not inherently a part of the fallen soul. Its in the very nature of ascetic struggle to achieve freedom. Its certainly not part of the fallen soul as such. The broader point is that the soul cannot be judged qua soul, since it didn't actually do anything qua soul. The implication that the soul is a "man" is a Gnostic heresy in that it sees the human material frame as indifferent to the soul. Each soul can go from one "meat suit" to another and be the same individual in each one. Its a denial of basic anthropology.

In the 1980 comment on Lev Puhalo, the Synod Abroad quotes Fr. Malinovsky on the partial judgment: "Doubtless, the justice of God's judgment which determines its fate will be clearly acknowledged by the soul itself which is judged by its own conscience." "Judgment" of God is too anthropomorphic. Our own conscience, forced into a state of perfect honesty and integrity, becomes well aware of its future state while, alive, it used all manner of bad faith excuses for its behavior. Nonetheless, this means nothing relative to its future state, since only a man can be judged, not a part of him.²¹

The Synod Abroad continues: "In this encounter with the powers of darkness, that have caused a man to stumble in the course of life and strive also to suggest to his soul that by its constitution it belongs to them and not to the Kingdom of Heaven, is the particular judgment accomplished." This, of course, makes the Toll House theory completely superfluous and

20 All cited from Puhalo, *Gehenna: The Orthodox Christian Doctrine about Judgment and Hell, from the Tradition and Holy Fathers* (Synaxis Press, 2016)

21 Malinovsky, N (1909). *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology IV*. Sergiev Posad

unnecessary. If this is true, then the debate can stop now and the theory done away with.

This doesn't imply some sort of "sleep," but the soul by itself is not a human being. If it were, then the body is a meaningless "meat suit," a material prison for the real man, the soul. In this sense, the Toll House theory does take directly from the Gnostic sects, though obviously inadvertently. Interestingly, the ROCOR makes this admission:

The soul of one who on earth has completed the course of the faith, thereby frees itself from evil. The demons have nothing in common with it and cannot touch it. Between these two aspects of souls – of the sinful and the holy – there still stand various degrees of sanctity or sinfulness, and in various degrees, the demons may harry them. These actions, which must in no way be accepted as the participation of the demons in the preliminary judgment, are what are referred to as the toll-stations. Rejection of possibility of their existence contradicts the consciousness of the ancient Church, as this is apparent from the Canon of Departure of the Soul. *Minimizing the significance of the fear in the face of the consequences of a sinful life and after the departure of the soul from the body, teaching of Fr. Lev. can weaken in the souls of his readers one of the stimuli to do battle with sin.*²²

Demons are not involved in the preliminary judgment. Then what's the point of the Toll House theory? The final sentence above gives an answer. It's to make people afraid to die. With this torture ahead of them, the negative energy of fear will drive the person to live a righteous life. This comes very close to a total rejection of the theory. It exists, or so it seems, to scare the simple.

There are two ways of viewing moral theology. The simplistic way is to borrow from judicial proceedings and treat God's judgment as similar to a courtroom. Sins are acts that have to be forgiven in confession before one can "enter" into heaven. This is a rationalist, bureaucratic view foreign to the faith. The other way is to treat sin as a state of mind. Men sin all the time. The greatest of saints say they were the greatest of sinners. Were they lying? Our acts are always sinful, but the state of our mind is what's judged.

Even if our minds are at the pinnacle of good order, we live in a sick and dying society where such a mind will still sin because it is so mismatched with the social institutions within which it must function. It's similar to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Our Postmodern world is a great machine that creates sinful desires and rewards these – at least some of the time. It looks upon the ascetic life with utter disdain. What happens when you place something pure into an evil environment? Sin will no doubt occur as even the holiest of souls fall under the relentless modern pressure to conform.

All told, the Toll House theory is problematic for many reasons. In my view, the most damning argument – pun intended – is that God's mercy is absent and demons are granted far more power than the faith allows. It is extremely crude. The Tale of Theodora cannot be an Orthodox document.

There has always been a tendency among strict Orthodox people (and even non-Orthodox) to exaggerate the presence and power of demons for the sake of maintaining good behavior. The ROCOR already admitted this is one of the reasons for the Toll house idea. If the Toll Houses are literal, then they're nonsense. If not, they're misleading. Either way, this extremely strange doctrine should be ignored or at least radically rewritten.

22 ROCOR, 1980, emphasis mine