

Christian Asceticism: The Recovery of Emotions and Feelings

The emotions and the senses are, in Orthodox spiritual and ascetical literature, often referred to negatively. In part this is due to how matter in general and the human body in particular were perceived. Among the Christian writers who were influenced by their pagan Greek predecessors, there ensued a spirituality and asceticism for whom the body was a prison or tomb of the spirit. The body, together with its senses, was a consequence of the ancestral sin i.e. the fall of Adam and Eve. Therefore, in order for the spirit to be free, the body, through ascetical exercises, had to die i.e. all emotions and feelings were to be overcome by the spiritual. Countering this negative perception of matter and the body were those Christian writers who, also influenced by their pagan ancestors, understood the person to be both body and spirit. From these writers there emerged a spirituality and asceticism that did not reject the body but saw it as a fundamental component of the human being.

Man and woman created in the image and likeness of God are of matter and spirit. In the second creation account described in Genesis 2, God forms man from dust while woman is formed from the rib of man. The imagery used in this story no doubt comes from literary sources outside of Judaism. Yet this story and the later story (in chapter 1) are distinguished from their original sources in that the human being is not a pre-existing spirit who had fallen into material captivity. Nor, given the materialism of our time, is the human being a creature like other animals with the exception of a developed intellect. The creation accounts in Genesis stress the uniqueness of man and woman created in God's image and likeness. While Genesis 1 acknowledges that all that God created was "very good," only the human being, bearing the image and likeness of God, presides over creation as King/Queen, prophet and priest. Only the one in God's image and likeness can unite the things in heaven with the things on earth.

Because human beings are somato-psychic, the ascetical life concentrates on the restoration of both the spiritual and material components of the person. This means that emotions and feelings are not to be put to death. Rather, they are to be transfigured along with the mind, will and body allowing every fiber of human life to eternally ascend within the life of God. This is the ascetical life – a life rooted in one's love for God, neighbor and self.

As an expression of love, the ascetical life is a response to God's love. God is the initiator of love. This overture of love, extended to every one and every thing, begins with the act of creation. God creates out of love that goes beyond the triune and tri-personal life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Divine love has no boundaries. Even sin cannot disrupt or diminish divine love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John3: 16) God's love revealed through the incarnate Son and Word enters the very depths of sin and death so we may have new and eternal life. As the Baptist proclaims; "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes upon himself the sin of the world!" (1:29) The dynamic of divine and human love is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets and the manifestation of the new commandment. Quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Jesus teaches, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew22: 37-40. The impact of this teaching is more strongly felt when read in light of what Jesus teaches earlier on in 5:17ff: "Think

not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.”) “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John13: 34-35)

From the beginning God created the human being to be free. That we are endowed with freedom is an expression of God’s limitless love. Consequently, while we are truly free only when seeking and abiding in communion with God, God offers the human being the ability to choose to accept and embrace his love or to reject it. The first chapters of Genesis reveal that the choice to reject God’s love was made. As a result sin and death entered the realm of human existence ultimately limiting human freedom.

It is the recovery of our freedom that lies at the heart of the ascetical life – the freedom to love God, neighbor and self. This recovery begins with the incarnation, i.e. the pre-eternal Word and Son of God becoming a human being. Taking on human nature, Jesus Christ reveals himself as the New Adam who restores what was lost through the fall of the first Adam. In the words of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd.c) “When he became incarnate and was made man, he recapitulated in himself the long history of man, summing up and giving us salvation in order that we might receive again in Christ Jesus what we had lost in Adam, that is, the image and likeness of God.” *Adversus Haereses*, 3,18,1) By the birth, death and resurrection of the New Adam human life is again brought into harmony with divine life. The human mind, will, body and energy are no longer in conflict with the divine mind, will and energy. Because of the incarnation, Christ’s humanity becomes the paradigm for our human nature.

Yet, while Christ has renewed our nature, in this life we are still prone to sin and subject to death. The human mind and will are still able to choose between light and darkness, life and death. So long as we are confronted with choice our freedom in Christ remains limited. A symptom of this restricted freedom is the disintegration and therefore antagonism between the spiritual and material components of our life. Paradoxically, this antagonism originates within the spiritual components of our nature. It is the mind and will and not the material components of our nature that determine the direction of our lives. The mind and will determine whether we cultivate a relationship with or away from God. Consequently, the movement of the rebellious mind and will away from God results in a rebellion of the feelings and emotions that extends back to Adam. In explaining the sin of Adam, Saint Maximus the Confessor (7th c.) writes that “As the forefather Adam did not pay attention to God with the eye of the soul [the mind], he neglected this light, and willingly, in the manner of a blind man, felt the rubbish of matter with both his hands in the darkness of ignorance, and inclined and surrendered the whole of himself to the senses alone.” (*Amb.* 10) Through a rebellious mind and will matter with all the senses, emotions and feelings become corrupted and consequently corrupting.

The cause of spiritual rebellion is often associated with self-love, which, for Saint Maximus, was derived from the fear of death; “The cause of this deviation [of the natural energies into destructive passions] is the hidden fear of death.” (*Questions to Thalassius*, 61) Grasping for life without the Life Giver polarizes not only matter and spirit but sets one human being against another. Life focused away from God gradually corrupts the senses and emotions. Confusion i.e. the yearning for God and rebellion against God are simultaneous. Succinctly, Saint Paul writes about this

confusion and inner struggle. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15)

By choosing not to love God and neighbor we are drawn into the isolation of self-love that moves the spiritual and material components of our life towards the negative passions. As this choice unfolds we gradually lose our true identity. Our point of reference relative to who we are is no longer God but ourselves. Perhaps the most frightening manifestation of this false identity is that of pietism. Hence, the outward expression of one’s love for God (especially in a public setting such as the Liturgy) and neighbor is in fact an expression of love for oneself. (Cf. The parable of the Publican and Pharisee, Luke 18: 9-14)

Our false identity bears also on how we understand and use creation. As with ourselves, the rest of creation is perceived and used apart from God. Drawing from pre-Christian Hellenism, the Christian ascetic tradition was well aware of the violence that accompanied self-love, the exploitation of creation and enslavement to the negative passions. From some of the pre-Christian dramatists and philosophers came the caveat about how love and the emotions can become intoxicating, i.e. they can take on a dynamic of their own, suppressing any kind of reflection and recognition of the other. This was clearly the case with the pagan temple rituals associated with the divinities of Eros and Dionysios. Though eros as an emotion/feeling could be understood as that which filled and completed a person’s life, especially as it drew the person into union with the One (Cf. Plotinus), we are also warned by Sophocles (Cf. Antigone) that eros – and by extension agape and philia – gives rise to violence as it drives one into a frenzy. In this intoxicated state one is severed from righteousness as the mind is destroyed and the senses reign out of control.

The antidote to a life of destructive passion – a life unable to love God, neighbor and self – is repentance. Metanoia, the changing of the mind – the movement of the mind and the will towards God leads to the healing and re-integration of the spiritual and material components of our being. Repentance leads to freedom in Christ that is dependent upon a humble mind that comes to accept its limitations. Moved by humility, repentance enables the mind to hear and love another voice i.e. the voice of God calling us from our self-imposed exile where mind, will, body, senses and emotions are in conflict with themselves and with God. Saint John of the Ladder (+7th c.) writes, “Humility is the unspeakable gift of the soul. Only to those who received it by experience is it unutterable wealth. It is the name bestowed upon God for, it says, learn not from an angel, nor from man, nor from a book but from me (Matt. 11:29), that is, learn from me who dwells in you and enlightens you and is active in you, for I am gentle and humble in heart and in thought and in mind. And you will find rest from conflicts and relief from the thoughts of your souls.” (Step 25)

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