

Contemporary Christian Spirituality: Insights from the Eastern Orthodox Medieval Mystical Tradition

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Abstract: This article aims to establish a credible contemporary spirituality through insights gained from the medieval Eastern Orthodox tradition. It argues that such a spirituality is based upon three foundational presuppositions: (a) the creation of the human person in the image and according to the likeness of a *Trinitarian* God; (b) the renewal of human persons in Christ and the deification of their nature and (c) the possibility for human persons to become participants in the gift of Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In a challenge to both East and West, it proposes that contemporary spirituality should be understood not only in monastic or private terms, that is as an individual's "ascent to heaven" but also as action in the world, as a "descent into the world".

A QUESTION OFTEN ASKED BY contemporary theologians of both the East and the West concerns the contribution Orthodox spirituality can make to the modern Western world in which Orthodoxy has found itself. The answer is twofold. Whereas Orthodox spirituality must give witness to that special ethos that it brings with it from its rich history, it must also, and perhaps more importantly interpret and translate this spirituality in a way of thinking intelligible to the Western mind.

The importance of this task can hardly be overstressed. The world in which we live is largely dominated by Western culture, since its political and economic superiority has made it into models for the rest of the world. Orthodox spirituality cannot be seen as an "exotic" religion, a refuge for those seeking mystical experiences analogous to those offered by different eastern religions. Those who pursued the great medieval spiritual tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church, including those who fled to monasteries, addressed themselves to the challenges of their culture and time. They did not teach an exotic religion but strove to transform the Hellenistic culture of their time and did so successfully. The present task of the great Eastern spiritual tradition is to relate this tradition to the problems of modern Western humanity which are

rapidly becoming the problems of humanity in its global dimension. To be sure the Eastern mystics had a Trinitarian vision of the Christian life, but it was between themselves and God. Today this Trinitarian vision of the Christian life gained from the medieval mystical tradition has to be translated and made relevant to the world at large. The fact that Christians today believe in a Trinitarian world should affect their socio-political outlook as well.

In the words of a French philosopher of the twentieth century, society today tends to see the "other" as enemy.¹ Western culture, subscribing to this view in more than one way, is founded fundamentally upon individualism. From the time of Boethius, who identified the person with the individual, and St Augustine who stressed the importance of consciousness and self-consciousness in his understanding of personhood, Western society has continued to build itself on these presuppositions. The happiness and the "rights of the individual" are to be sought for and protected at any cost and are fundamental necessities to the Australian way of life in general. Human beings in fact feel more and more threatened by the presence of the other. Society has instilled a propensity to consider others as enemy before beginning to treat them as friend.

The basic premise that human beings are communal creatures, something which was so fundamental for the eastern mystics, cannot be taken for granted any more. In modern society people are brought up to accept the other only in so far as that person does not threaten their privacy or is useful to their individual quest for happiness. Brought up with a fear of the other, people fear not only the other but all forms of "otherness", and they accept others only on the basic condition that they are somehow like themselves.

A contemporary spirituality needs to affirm that human persons should love other people not despite their difference but because they are different and unique. And the reason for this is that all human beings are made in the image and according to the likeness of God. A modern Christian spirituality will cease to be *totally* private and devotional and begin to be relational, seeking to *transform* the world in which it lives.

A contemporary spirituality based on the insights gained from the Eastern Orthodox medieval mystical tradition has to rest on the following three basic presuppositions:

- (a) the creation of humankind in the image and according to the likeness of a Trinitarian God;
- (b) the renewal of human persons in Christ and the deification of their nature; and

1. J. -P. Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Galliard, 1943) 25.

(c) the possibility for human persons to become participants in the gift of Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

As mentioned above, a foundational teaching of the Orthodox Church is that all human beings are made in the image and according to the likeness of God. We could add that all human persons are made in the image and likeness of God *the Trinity*. This means that human persons are to reproduce here on earth, the relationship that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit in all eternity. If Christians are to really understand who they are and what their aim here on earth is, then they must have a clear understanding of the Triune God after whose image everyone is created. Orthodox spirituality would claim that if humanity were truly to possess this understanding, the result would be paradise on earth and the fulfilment of life. Having been created in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God, human beings can find happiness only through being in communion with the true God. Simply put, this means an acceptance of truth, beauty, goodness – and indeed of all the attributes of the God, in whose image all human persons have been created.

Orthodox spirituality would claim that the rejection of this foundational premise would bring about hell down here on earth, since hell amounts to nothing other than the futile attempt of human beings to destroy themselves as creatures made in God's image and likeness. Like the God in whose image they are made, they too are not intended to be separate individuals in purely external relationship with one another. Nor are they called to live collectively as a whole without human integrity. Like their Creator God, human beings are made to be persons in a community, distinct persons in an identity of nature. Moreover they are called to a perfect union of being and action in fulfilment of all virtues, the greatest of which is love. All this is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, who does not effect an independent work of reconciliation but makes each one a participant in the work of renewal which was completed once and for all in Christ.

This dynamic movement from image to likeness begins at baptism, which initiates an individual's formation into a community of persons in the image of the Triune God. According to the Tradition, baptism is a birth "from above" by which one's being is illuminated and the road opened to become "in the likeness". One of the early ascetic writers of the Christian East, Mark the Monk (fl. c. 430) wrote:

By the grace of Christ, you have become a new Adam... The Lord came for our sakes and died for us. He delivered us from inherited death. He cleanses us and renews us through baptism. He sets us in the paradise of the Church.²

2. *On Baptism*, PG 65:1025AB.

From the above it becomes clear that the entire spiritual life is understood as nothing other than the progressive realisation (or "revelation", as Mark describes it) of the grace received originally at baptism.

SPIRITUALITY MODELLED ON A TRINITARIAN GOD

Having been created by a Trinitarian God, human persons bear the image of God. But, according to the medieval Orthodox tradition, the same cannot be said regarding being "in the likeness", which is offered to human persons only as a possibility, and which is the aim of the Christian life. But, characteristically, St Gregory Palamas noted that "everyone is in the image of God, perhaps even in the likeness".³ Before him, St Maximus the Confessor summed up the Eastern spirituality tradition by explicitly stating the difference between image and likeness: "every intelligent nature is in the image of God, but only the good and the wise are in His likeness".⁴

Humanity's likeness to God is not imposed by force but is left to its free disposition. The fall obscured the image since humanity distanced itself from God and made likeness to God impossible. It was only with the incarnation of the Word of God that humankind's nature was renewed. As a consequence the whole world is called to live a life in Christ, effected by communion in the grace of the Holy Spirit.

This journey from the image towards the likeness takes place in the ecclesial community of the Church. The Church is made up of sinners and shares fully the ontological and cosmic dimension of sin and division. Yet the Orthodox tradition insists that the Church is sinless and holy in its essence. This implies that the first step in the Christian life is repentance (*metanoia*). All share in the fall of Adam and all are to repent of the fact that they have failed in their calling, their calling, that is, to transform and radically change the world, leading it to communion with God.

If a contemporary Christian spirituality is to be based on a Trinitarian foundation in this way, it is crucial to make sense of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. In expounding the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the Orthodox Church begins with the *community* of the three Persons in the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rather than with their unity. In fact the medieval mystical tradition identifies person with *hypostasis*. In the mystery of the Holy Trinity there are three *distinct and equal* Persons and these three persons are *distinct* (other) from one another, divided yet united, each possessing the fullness of the Divinity. The three unique and distinct Persons of the Holy Trinity continually embrace one

3. *On the Making of Man* 5, PG 44.185CD.

4. *On Love* 3,25.

another in an interpenetrating communion of love (*alleloperichoresis*). Each of the Persons is completely open to the other, totally transparent and receptive. In fact, there is a communion and otherness that exists in the Triune God and which is constitutive of the unity of the Trinity. The Trinity is a unity, not because there is a unity of substance as the West has argued, but by the *monarchia* of the Father, who is Himself one of the Trinity. Their unity is also expressed by the unbreakable *koinonia* that exists between the three Persons, which implies that otherness does not threaten unity but is rather a *sine qua non* condition of it.

Fellowship or community is central to the being of God since it presupposes not an abstract being of God, as is supposedly the case in the West, but persons who are capable of fellowship. St Gregory of Nyssa stresses the idea of Trinitarian *koinonia* :

In the life-creating nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit there is no division, but only a continuous and inseparable communion (*koinonia*) between them.... It is not possible to envisage any severance or division, such that one might think of the Son without the Father, or separate the Spirit from the Son; but there is between them an ineffable and inconceivable communion (*koinonia*) and distinction.⁵

The anthropological consequences and implications of such a doctrine are great. An Orthodox doctrine of the mystery of the Holy Trinity is of immense significance for a contemporary Christian spirituality since it sheds light on human personhood. Furthermore, a correct understanding guides and illumines us to live a life of communion with God and others in the Church.

Just as the Persons of the Trinity are distinct yet are in communion, so too human persons cannot be without others. The Orthodox understanding of the Trinity can be the only way of understanding this notion of personhood. The Father cannot be conceived even for one moment without the Son and the Spirit, and the same applies with the other Persons in relation with the Father and with each other. Therefore human persons cannot truly exist without others.

The second consequence of this truth is that personhood is inconceivable without freedom: the freedom of being other. Freedom clearly signifies diversity and distinctiveness. Difference (*diaphora*) must be maintained but this should not lead to separation (*diastasis*). Sadly today there is a fear of difference. Freedom is closely related to love. Persons can truly love only if they allow other persons to be unique and different.

From all of the above it becomes very clear that the mystery of the Trinitarian dogma is very important for an outline of a contemporary

5. *On the difference between Essence and Hypostasis*, 4, PG 32 332A.

spirituality and a life of communion in general. A Christian spirituality today is to bear witness to this truth to the modern world which laments its individualism and the disappearance of the personal in the impersonal mass. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a source for personal values able to transcend the modern consumerist society.

Since the Godhead is expressed from all eternity in a relationship of three persons, this means that because human persons are created in the image and likeness of God, they too need each other in order to be authentically themselves. If God is a relational being then the human person is likewise relational. Human beings can only exist to the extent that they relate with others in a loving way. The "other" in this case, without whom human persons cannot find their true self, is primarily God but it also includes other human beings.

Therefore this relational dimension of being created in the image of God implies both vertical and horizontal relationships. To be a human being means saying: "I need you in order to become myself." If the philosopher Descartes was right to affirm, "*cogito ergo sum*" (I know therefore I am), it is also vital to affirm, "*amo ergo sum*" (I love therefore I am), since love is the being of the God in whose image the entire human race has been created.

Human beings are not, then, called to be *individuals* competing with one another but rather *persons* working together *with* others. The whole purpose of life is to grow from a false sense of security in which people believe themselves fulfilled as individuals, to becoming relational *loving persons*. It is to the extent that they love – give up their will for the sake of the other – that human persons find completion. In so doing they are not annihilated but enriched, being initiated into an entirely different world, seen through the eyes of another.

With the Godhead expressed from all eternity in relationship, a contemporary spirituality must stress that human persons cannot live without, and be indifferent to, their neighbour. In this way, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, far from being speculative, has immediate and transfiguring consequences for the way human beings live their daily lives. In the words of the eccentric but shrewd Russian thinker Nicholas Fyodorov (1828-1903), humanity's "social programme is the dogma of the Trinity".⁶

Belief in God who is three-in-one, whose characteristics are sharing and solidarity, has direct and practical consequences for Christian attitudes towards politics, economics and social action. Every form of community – the family, the school, the city, the nation, etc. – has as its vocation to become an icon, a living reflection of the Holy Trinity. If Christians believe in a loving God, then they fight for justice and for

6. Nicholas Fyodorov, quoted in Olivier Clément, *L'Église orthodoxe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961) 63.

human rights, for a caring society in the name of the Trinity. They are compelled to struggle with all efforts against poverty, exploitation, oppression and disease because of their faith in a Trinitarian God. They should understand that when they fight against these things, they do not do so simply on philanthropic or humanitarian grounds. Precisely because they know that God is three-in-one, a loving God, they cannot remain indifferent to suffering on the part of any member of the human race, in any part of the world. They are responsible for everyone and everything. Such is the compelling relevance of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity for the life and action of every one of us.

SPIRITUALITY MODELLED ON CHRIST

The truth that all human persons are created in the “image of God” implies that at an ecclesiological and anthropological level a contemporary spirituality will stress the importance of being incorporated into the One who is the original and authentic image of the Father, namely, the Son of God incarnate. The Scriptures disclose Jesus Christ as the image of God after whom all human persons are created (2 Cor 4:4, 6; Col 1:15). God is holy and therefore completely different from anything in creation. It is only in the light of Jesus Christ, God’s perfect and uncreated image, that one can learn what it means to be created in God’s image and likeness. To bear the image of God is to become Christ-like,⁷ as made clear in St Paul’s Letter to the Colossians: “stripping off the old self (lit. “man”) with its practices and clothing yourselves with the new self, the one which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (3:9b-10). That is, to be truly human one must attain “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

If Christ is in the image of God and human persons are in the image of Christ, then it can be said that humanity is in the image of the Image. For this reason some Fathers carried this Pauline line of thought further to state that, while Christ is the direct image of God, human beings are *in the image*.⁸ Through union with Christ, the essential gulf between humanity and divinity is bridged. In Christ human beings find their true fulfilment and destiny, as they become capable of being raised up into an image of God.

This has several important consequences. First, a Christian’s life implies and requires the experience of the cross. Just as Jesus sacrificed his will in Gethsemane, Christians must sacrifice their will for the other. The Son of God emptied himself through the *kenosis* of the incarnation

7. It is Christ who is the perfect image of God. Adam was simply the “type of the one who was to come”, namely Jesus Christ (Rom 5:14).

8. For example, Origen wrote that “the firstborn of all creation is the image of God...and human persons were made in the image of God”. *Against Celsus* 6, 63 (PG 11, 1393).

and so the *kenotic* way is the only way befitting Christians in their relationship with the other – be it God or the neighbour.

A further implication is that every human person is to be accepted not for certain qualities which they may possess but for the sheer fact that they are who they are. Discrimination is not compatible with the Christian life. Therefore a contemporary spirituality will not remain indifferent to discrimination of any kind, whether social or political, since its christological model does not allow this.

Moreover, the respect owed to that which is “other” applies not only to human persons but to creation in general. The tragedy of humanity is that human beings have tended to absorb rather than respect that which is other in creation. This has led to today’s ecological crisis. Nature is “the other” which human persons as *microcosm* are called not to exploit but to bring into communion with themselves, finding and affirming that it is “very good”.

SPIRITUALITY MODELLED ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

Finally, a contemporary Christian spirituality flowing from the Orthodox tradition will not undervalue the role of the Holy Spirit. In the past the Christian life has been articulated almost exclusively in terms of Christ at the expense of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit which is associated with the concept of *koinonia* (2 Cor 13:13) and humanity’s entrance into the eschatological realm (Acts 2:17-18). When the role of the Holy Spirit is highlighted, then Christian spirituality becomes communal and relational rather than individualistic. The Spirit leads people to see the other as an ontological part of their own identity, with the result that they cannot remain indifferent to the suffering around them. Moreover, the eschatological dimension makes Christians accept the other not on the basis of his or her past or present but on that of the future. Since every person’s future lies in the hands of God, people can be seen not in judgmental terms but as potential saints in the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

In the past Christian spirituality has been delineated in very monastic and private terms. Spirituality was understood to be that inherent dimension of every person created in the image and according to the likeness of God, which made them radically open to the transcendent mystery. To be sure, the medieval mystical tradition represents a vast accumulation of wisdom in its quest for union and ultimately deification with the Trinitarian God. But this Trinitarian vision of the Christian life, explained in personal terms as the mystic’s relationship with his or her God, meant that spirituality was understood as the mystical (apophatic) experience of persons in their spiritual quest. A modern Christian

spirituality will still stress the individual's "*ascent to heaven*" by living the virtuous life, but will not do so at the expense of action in the world. This does not mean that medieval mystical tradition ceases to have relevance in today's society. In terms of our understanding of the Christian life that would represent a considerable impoverishment – the loss of a spirituality flowing from a lived experience of a Trinitarian God and a struggle to reflect upon and articulate that experience. The medieval vision provides a firm foundation for contemporary Christian spirituality, which needs to make it relevant to the human situation today. The "*ascent to heaven*" spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox medieval mystical tradition needs to be complemented by a "*descent into the world*" spirituality that takes more seriously relationship to other people and to the wider world (environment) entrusted to us.