

SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE VERSUS MYSTICISM

The true goal of our Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Fasting, vigils, prayer, charity and all good deeds done for the sake of Christ are but means for the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. St Seraphim of Sarov.

From an Orthodox Christian perspective, we are not seeking «spirituality,» rather we are seeking the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Both pietistic spirituality and mysticism are heretical in every context. Spiritual struggle (or «asceticism,» which constitutes the normal Orthodox Christian approach to life) has nothing to do with mysticism, pietism or self-inflicted suffering. Moreover, it is false to presume that asceticism is the realm of monastics or a rarefied few in the Orthodox Christian Church. Asceticism is the norm of life for right-believing Orthodox Christians.

Theology without asceticism (spiritual struggle) is dead legalism, while spiritual struggle (asceticism) without sound theology is sheer mysticism and delusion. It is this bond of sound theology and asceticism (spiritual struggle) which comprises the Orthodox Christian spiritual life, for it pertains to body and soul together as a unified organism and constitutes the «living theology of Orthodox Christianity.» The Orthodox Christian spiritual life of measured asceticism is as totally inseparable from the dogmas and theology of the faith as these dogmas and theology are inseparable from the gospel of salvation itself. Indeed, as the great 20th century father of the Church, Saint Antony, Metropolitan of Kiev, has demonstrated, the very moral life of Christianity, which leads to salvation, rests upon the truths of the inseparable dogmas of the Trinity, the Holy Church, the Incarnation, Re-

demption and the Holy Spirit. Thus we cannot speak of Orthodox Christian spiritual life without speaking of the dogmas and theology of the faith. Nor could we express our meaning of the term «living theology» without first laying down these sketchy presuppositions concerning the Orthodox spiritual mind.

The Orthodox Christian life is a wholly creative, progressive existence which, in Lossky's words, is a «renunciation of, and moving away from, all that is fixed and stagnant, and reaching out toward the final consummation,» toward what is perfect, complete and eternal. It is impossible to discuss or to apprehend this creative progression in terms of non-Orthodox philosophy or philosophical concepts, for they themselves are merely human systems of thought, caught in the realm of creatureliness, unable to contemplate anything else except things like themselves — that is, things finite and created.

The theology of Orthodoxy, then, is a living, creative force precisely because it is inseparably bound up with the mystical-ascetical life — that is, with the very real struggle actually and fully to live the theology. Whereas, in the West, an individual theological writer strives to be creative by giving new forms and expression to philosophical theology, in Orthodoxy every single practising Orthodox Christian progresses corporately in the Church by yielding to the creative power of the Holy Spirit, and allowing divine theology to give new forms and expression to his own being. In Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, creativity in theology consists in only a dialectical exercise; in Orthodox Christianity, it is a transfiguration and deification of the entire, unified being of the individual. This is most clearly expressed in

the respective concepts of salvation. In Western Christianity, salvation is viewed almost exclusively as a legal process, a punitive event carried out between a vengeful father figure and a dutiful son. In Orthodox Christianity, salvation is realized as a living, vital process, one in which the response of man to the co-suffering love of Christ leads to illumination and purification and, ultimately, to glorification and theosis.

Asceticism (spiritual struggle) is an expression which faces the semantic wall. For the Orthodox it means something essentially very different from what it may mean to a non-Orthodox person. Indeed, to a purely superficial viewer, all asceticism appears generally identical and is often identified as mysticism. This external, apparent sameness comes from the fact that deity is incomprehensible. Even the concept of deity is above ordinary human reason. In a certain sense, what separates spiritual struggle from materialistic rationalism is the acceptance or rejection of the incomprehensibility, the wholly «otherness» of God. In any society that does not worship matter and the human ego, in the absence of revelation or a sound theology, a religion based in mysticism is likely to grow up simply because of the natural longing of the human soul to seek its source. Very often, the striving toward the divine is manifested in excessive self-abnegation and an introspective mysticism which pretends that the spirit of man can develop and ascend independently of the body. In Gnostic and oriental forms, there is a concept that the material and immaterial parts of man are at enmity with one another, and that the «spirit» (or «soul») must escape the material (the body) in order to experience spiritual ascent.

All mankind is born with the grace to know that God exists and, also, with the grace to know that one must seek God. Hence, the soul, which realizes the incomprehensibility of deity, will be led to either mysticism or, in the presence of a sound, living theology, to controlled spiritual struggle as a way toward the deity, knowing the limits of human reason.

Orthodoxy, however, is sharply different from all religions based in mysticism; first, because God has become incarnate and revealed Himself to us; second, because the incarnation of God and the possession by Christ of both natures (divine and human) has made possible what was previously impossible: it has reconciled the material with the immaterial in a certain way and has shown us that physical, material things can be grace-bearing. Above all, it brought the heavenly Church to earth, rescued the earthly Church and restored it to oneness with the heavenly. This single unity of heavenly and earthly is the essential meaning of Orthodoxy. It is what makes Orthodox Christian spiritual struggle a practical reality — a sort of response or yielding to the magnetic force of divine love, which draws the believer to a desire for a knowledge of God, not the merely descriptive knowledge of written teachings, nor the egoistic subjective emotionalism of mysticism or Christian enthusiasm cults, but the knowledge of first-hand experience.

Theology, then, because it indicates «knowledge about God,» is a spiritual process which is guided and guarded by certain dogmas, doctrines and Scripture. It is true theology and true spiritual struggle (asceticism) because it takes place within the Holy Church, the Head of which is the object of all theological and spiritual strivings. Nevertheless, no expanse of definition will be sufficient to clarify the meaning of «asceticism» (spiritual struggle), for all definition is essentially scholastic and legalistic. We can, however, give this elementary explanation; asceticism is the spiritual basis of the life of every Orthodox believer and is manifested as the spiritual struggle which touches each and every truly Orthodox person. It is essentially the struggle to acquire the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, by which one may struggle to live and conform to the morality of co-suffering love taught by Christ and by the dogmas of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Christian concept of morality is far removed from those Western notions of legalistic norms of «good behaviour,» which curse and condemn those who fall below a certain minimum level of «acceptable» conduct. The concept of morality which permeates Orthodox Christian theology is an ideal of active struggle with one's own weaknesses and vices, and a gradual transformation and transfiguration of the entire being of the individual: purification, illumination and glorification.

In this respect asceticism is this: in striving to live the teachings of Christ, in obedience to His Church, one attains grace from God. Ascending by means of this grace, one experiences the reality of the theology. So, at this level, we can see the two inseparable phenomena of theology and asceticism thus: asceticism (spiritual struggle) is the means by which one strives to live the theology and to experience the reality of the theology.

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