

THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY: THOUGHTS FROM THE CHRISTIAN EAST

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Abstract

This paper is offered as an example of a human science approach to the study of spirituality as a universal human experience. From the author's perspective, spirituality is not only a universal element of human experience, but (because I equate spirituality with human freedom), spirituality is THE foundationally quality of the human. The thesis to be tested is this: Through a careful consideration of themes central to a specific spiritual tradition (in this case, the relationship of communion and asceticism in the Eastern Christian liturgical spirituality), we can come to an appreciative critical understanding not only of that tradition, but also of themes foundational to all human spiritualities.

The paper begins with a criticism of two **reductionistic approaches** to the study of spirituality, one empirical (**projectionism**) the other theological (**mystification**) that in their rejection of, or indifference to, concrete human freedom undermine the very possibility of spirituality. This is followed by a phenomenological analysis of the relationship of communion and asceticism in the Eastern Christian tradition. To help elucidate this relationship, the author consults a key element in Hasidic anthropology: self-contraction. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of the promises and risks of a human science approach to the study of human and Christian spirituality in light of a liturgical-ascetical spirituality of communion.

In addition to validating my thesis I hope to accomplish a number of other goal. (1) To increase the reader's appreciation of the spirituality of the Eastern Christian church; (2) To demonstrate that far from being necessarily antagonistic, the findings of the social and human sciences can serve to help adherents of traditional modes of spirituality appreciatively and critically appropriate and understand their own tradition; (3) To demonstrate that the social and human science in helping to us explain and understand concrete human behavior can serve as a bridge between traditions. (4) Finally, I hope to demonstrate that, the (qualitative and quantitative) psychological study of spirituality is itself a legitimate spiritual discipline that can and should be cultivated both in its own right and as an ally of traditional modes of spirituality.

Thoughts From the Christian East

I come to the study of spirituality as a universal human experience wearing two hats. First, I am a psychologist of religion specializing in spirituality and spiritual formation. As a psychologist, I work within the qualitative methods of a human science approach (Giorgi, 1970) to the study of human behavior and experience in general and spirituality in particular (van Kaam, 1987). From within this perspective, spirituality is the dimension of human freedom and as such not only a universal element of human experience, but THE foundationally quality that distinguishes us from the rest of the material world, organic and inorganic. In other words, the study of spirituality is the study of the human person as distinctively rather than merely, human. (van Kaam, 1983a).

The qualitative study of human spirituality, ideally, must include a consideration of the various dimensions within which we live and express our freedom. Because we are at a minimum, physical beings, we first discover ourselves and express our spiritual life as beings-in-world. This is not simply any world, but a profoundly social and tradition-laden world first mediated to us (for good or ill) by our parents. As I will address more at length below, developmentally, and paradoxically enough, we have our first experience of our own freedom through our conformity to the demands of our culture as embodied by our parents (van Kaam, 1983b).

But as I said, I come to the study of spirituality wearing two hats and my second hat is a *kamilavka*, the upside down stovepipe hat that I wear as a married Greek Orthodox priest. As a parish priest who also teaches theology at a Catholic university, I must confess that I am not wholly comfortable with trying to understand psychologically spirituality as a universal part of human experience. My discomfort is not primarily directed at the work of other scholars as much as it is a reflection of my own ambiguity towards my own research and writing in what I have termed in this paper a human science approach the study of spirituality. Specifically what concerns me about such a scholarly endeavor is how easily it lends itself to either an empirical or theological reductionism that ignores or undermines human freedom as the hallmark of a distinctive human or spiritual way of life.

Empirical and Theological Modes of Reductionism

I would characterize the empirical form of reductionism as a projectionist approach to the study of spirituality. By projectionist I mean the presupposition (implicit or explicit) that spirituality has no other content than the psychosocial. Because it is reductionistic, the projectionist approach does not allow one to maintain that a person's spirituality is anything more than a psychological or sociological reality. As a consequence, if we are not careful, our attempts to study spirituality psychologically might (inadvertently) ignore and ultimately undermine, the theological or ontological content of human spirituality (Smith, 1992; Quay, 1992; Belonick, 1992). But why, should psychologists be concerned with theological or ontological questions?

When we separate spirituality from its theological or ontological moorings, we risk forgetting that "God is a mystery, which means, by definition, God is beyond our intellectual comprehension and understanding." Precisely because human beings cannot know God the way we know mathematics, for example, eastern Christian spirituality (and the theology that is articulated from that spirituality) proceeds along the **apophatic** way. The apophatic or negative way, however, is not a corrective of "the positive way, which

proceeds by analogy of being.” For the early church, and especially (but by no means exclusively) the Greek speaking church, the only way to know God, is through the “absence of all intellectual knowledge.” This is not to say that we cannot God know “at all; it only means that He cannot be known intellectually. However He can be known “existentially,” by “connaturality,” as “He offers Himself in communion” (Aghiorgoussis, 1993).

At least in Christian spirituality, the human intellect does not ascend to God; rather it is God Who condescends to our level. Forgetting the role of the divine condescension risks confusing orthodox Christian (east and west) spirituality with gnosticism. Why do I say this?

Both Christianity and gnosticism begin from the premise that “all true speech about God must be ‘apophatic,’ must deny the rules by which we wield the language spoken.” But unlike gnosticism, which would have us “continuously to make up language in which to speak of God,” Christian spirituality is predicated upon the conviction that humanity is “given [a] language [about God] that is immune to our manipulation, that is ‘sacramental’ in its density” (Jenson, 1992).

While we may or may not agree with the apophatic epistemology that underlies at least some approaches to Christian spirituality, if we ignore Christian understanding of apophaticism, if we fail to understand that conformity to a received language is at the basis of Christian spirituality, we end up confusing the essentially positive tone of Christian skepticism with the essentially negative tone of Gnostic skepticism about god-talk. As a result of this confusion, we obstruct, rather than facilitate, any attempts at a cross-cultural dialogue about spirituality as a universal human experience. Let me be clear here, I am not suggesting that one must necessarily prefer one tradition to another, only that one be clear that similar forms must not be taken as evidence of similar convictions.

While we should not minimize the importance of theological and ontological considerations, we ought be on our guard least we make the opposite mistake and reduce the study of spirituality to a theological discipline. It is certainly important that we consider the insights that theology and philosophy can provide us, but these disciplines alone are insufficient for the study of human and Christian spirituality. The empirical and qualitative research methods of human science movement can help to keep teaching and research in spirituality grounded in concrete human experience. In addition, and again by focusing on the concrete, the social and human sciences can help us see practical similarities between traditions and thereby help broaden our view of human and/or Christian spiritual experience beyond the limits of our respective traditions.

At their best, the qualitative and integrational methodologies of a human science approach to the study of human and Christian spirituality are consonant with the Eastern Christian church view that life, is *synergistic*, a cooperative work between God and humanity. My concerns about reductionism then, are neither wholly empirical nor are they wholly theological. Rather, as I said a moment ago, the social and human sciences on the one hand, and theological studies on the other, must be brought into a fruitful dialogue as partners in their joint interest in the human person.

The empirical social and human sciences have a great ability to explain human behavior. But too easily, explanation can come at the expense of understanding, of a true

empathy for the other that must be at the basis of a just and peaceful society. As has been shown in the context of psychopathology, explanation of human behavior is insufficient and can lend itself to a dismissal of the other in his/her uniqueness (Szasz, 1970). While not sufficient, understanding spirituality means being open to understanding, on its own terms, the faith or ideological tradition out of which that spirituality has developed and to which spirituality looks for its own justification and resources (van Kaam, 1992)

But, if the social and human sciences try to explain spirituality without understanding it as a lived event of human freedom, theology has the opposite difficulty: Understanding spirituality without any attempt at explanation. In the case of theology, projectionism gives way to mystification, of co-opting God's Name for our own purposes.

The difficulty with mystification is that for better or worse, human beings do not live on the level of the ultimate, but in the here and now. I do not wish to disparage theological and metaphysical speculations (after all, imagine what it means when the creature lays claim to the Divine Name when we say (as God does to Moses), "I am"?), only to say that they are insufficient and must be balanced by the empirical explanations offered by the social and human sciences.

Whether we are talking about its psychological or theological form, reductionism is a rejection of human freedom and an indifference to the mystery of human being and becoming as it is manifested in the concrete here and now. So where does this leave us for our current concern to offer an example of a human science approach to the study of spirituality as a universal human experience?

Within my own tradition, human freedom is related teleologically to the love of God and neighbor. The words of Jesus in the Gospel:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind and with thy whole strength. This is the first commandment. And the second is like to it: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than these (Mt 12.30-31)

In other words, I am free to the degree that I love God and my neighbor with out reservation. And again, within the tradition of the Christian east, one place where we see this mutual love embodied is in the celebration of the Eucharist in the Divine Liturgy. It is to the Liturgy as the embodiment of love (or communion) that we will now turn with an eye towards not only explanation but also understanding what it might mean to be a spiritual being. As it often does we will with a story that illumines a concrete moment of human freedom. So let me offer for consideration a short story---a vignette about first impressions of Orthodox worship.

Conformity and Human Freedom

One evening several years ago I had the opportunity to speak to the youth group of a liberal mainline Protestant denomination. In the course of the evening, I was asked about how Orthodox Christians worship on Sunday morning. As the conversation unfolded, the students asked me if I had to wear a cassock on Sunday. At that point, and to the disbelief of the young people, I began to explain that, yes I did in fact wear my cassock for services on Sunday, even in the 100 degree plus that regularly afflicted us in the part of northern California where I lived at the time. From there, I began to

explain the mechanics of priestly vestments.

Just as I was finishing my description of the vestments I wear and the prayers that as a priest I say when I vest, one of the adult leaders looks up and says (quite loudly), "My goodness! Your worship sounds terribly formal!"

I offer this little story because it expresses well the typical response of first time visitors to almost any Orthodox service. It is a story that certainly expresses my own first impressions, when, as college student traveling in Greece, I first worshipped in the Orthodox Church. Whether they see it as good, bad or indifferent, there are very few people who fail to experience Orthodox liturgy as any approaching informal or spontaneous.

Many people come away wondering about the conformity that is required in order in an Orthodox worship service. In Orthodoxy, and really in any formal liturgical celebration, one must set aside one's own immediate desires and conform one's self to the behavioral demands or expectations of the community. In other words, in liturgy our behavior is not (relatively speaking) spontaneous but habitual and ritualized. While Orthodox Christians generally give this habitual and ritualized behavior a benign interpretation, those outside the tradition do not always view it as such. For many, the idea of ritualized and habituated behavior is taken to be in some way inauthentic and even antithetical to human and Christian freedom. There is a certain justice to this hesitancy to embrace the highly ritualized behavior since they can easily serve to mask our true face and heart.

And yet, if we view this conformity developmentally, we discover that our entrance into a distinctively human or spiritual form of life is by way of conformity to the demands of tradition as mediated by our parents. This founding act of conformity is the source of our future openness to the world of persons, events and things that co-constitute our everyday life. Because we are bodily creatures, to be human, means that we can never be human alone. Our body always causes us to reach beyond ourselves to others. We are, if you would, fundamentally **erotic** beings, that is beings that always look beyond ourselves to others (Beet, 1966).

Because of our fundamental erotic nature, the **confirming** and **appreciative** presence of the parents is central in the life of the growing child. Through their presence parents can create for the child a sense of security in his/her world. This in turn fosters in the child the conviction that s/he is a capable and worthwhile individual. On the other hand, the **lack** of a generally appreciative and confirming parental presence can be devastating to the child's development. Without parental support (and this lack can be real or perceived) the child can develop a pervasive sense anxiety and loss, or never develop, the sense that he or she is a capable and worthwhile individual (van Kaam, 1986).

As we grow older this seminal experience of trust is sufficient to awaken in us a sense of our own autonomy. And while the adult may still conform to the demands of society, unlike the conforming behavior of infancy, this new conformity is freely chosen and includes those “acts and dispositions that once confirmed do not require a new appraisal and decision.” Characteristic of this disposition to mature conformity is our willingness “to ratify without resentment flexible conformity to those routine aspects of social living that do not necessarily detract from the foundational uniqueness of [our own] life” (van Kaam, 1983b, p. 269).

We are beginning to see that if we look beneath the surface of conformity there is an implicit (if ambiguous) openness to others. This openness harkens back to the common human experience of infancy. Developmentally, the habitual and ritualized behavior that so dramatically characterizes liturgical worship is rooted in the mythic depths of infancy and early childhood. Additionally, the ritualized liturgical behavior incarnates an implicit, though again, ambiguous openness to others.

Throughout the life cycle, healthy human development is not possible unless, like the infant, we entrust ourselves to the caring others (Parks 1986). At the same time, we must be cautious in romanticizing either the role of in human development. Certainly, others are central to our identity because, we are born into “an objective social structure” within which we encounter others who (whether by intent or default) are responsible for our socialization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 161). The formation of our identity and the discovery and embodiment of our freedom, is both a psychological and social process by which we come to take a stand or find our place within pre-given and objective social structures (i.e., a tradition):

To be given an identity involves being assigned a specific place in the world. As this identity is subjectively appropriated by the child (“I am John Smith”), so is the world to which this identity points. Subjective appropriation of identity and subjective appropriation of the social world are merely different aspects of the **same** process of internalization, mediated by the **same** significant others (Berger and Luckmann, p.132).

But it is precisely because the development of our identity happens within pre-given social structures that this process of gradual socialization and internalization is also a challenge to our freedom.

So in my own case, to be called, “Fr. Gregory,” for example, means that I am assigned a place in the ecclesial society that exists prior to my acceptance or rejection the place. This in fact is the meaning of ordination; one is given (and receives) a place within the community. And even if I choose to reject that identity, or parts of that identity, my rejection is still characterized by the objective givenness signaled by my name. To say, “I am not Fr. Gregory,” or that “I am no longer Fr. Gregory,” means that I reject (or affirm negatively) the identity given me by my tradition. By this act of rejection, I define myself by an act of negation that still weds me to pre-given social structures. By purely psychological and social mechanisms I am incapable of escaping what is given prior to my consent.

This affront to human freedom, and thus dignity, is important to any consideration of human and Christian spirituality. Just as some can too easily assume that spirituality is simply a form of infantile regression, so others too easily assume that the rejection of the formal and structured dimension of a spiritual tradition (i.e., “I’m spiritual, but not

religious.”) is motivated by pride. How a particular person responds to the formal structures and dynamics of a religious tradition is psychologically and sociologically much more complicated than either of these options would suggest. So that said, where do we go from here?

The Idea of “Communion” in Eastern Christianity

Because eastern Christianity’s anthropology is grounded in Trinitarian theology and Christology, I would suggest that we follow the apophatic way not only in our conversations about God, but also the human person. And just as we cannot know God the way we know mathematics, but only “connaturality,” as He freely offers Himself to us in an act of communion, so too we can only know each other through our free communion with each other.

Whether within the divine society of the Holy Trinity, or the bond of love between God and humanity, or between members of the human community, communion is not a relationship understood for its own sake, an existential structure which supplants “nature” or “substance” in its primordial ontological role—something reminiscent of the structure of existence in the thought of Martin Buber. Just like “substance,” “communion” does not exist by itself: it is [God] the **Father** who is the “cause” of it. This thesis of the Cappadocians that introduced the concept of “cause” into the being of God assumed an incalculable importance. For it meant that the ultimate ontological category which makes something **be**, is neither an impersonal and incommunicable “substance,” nor a structure of communion existing by itself or imposed by necessity, but rather the **person** (Zizioulas, 1985, pp. 17-18).

Theologically, the ontological priority of the person means that God is God, not because of His substance or nature (*ousia* or *esse*), but because God is not circumscribed by His nature; “communion is not a constraining structure of His existence (God is not in communion, does not love, because He cannot but be in communion and love).” That God exists and loves is a

consequence of a free person; which means in the last analysis, that not only communion but also **freedom**, the free person, constitutes true being. True being comes only from the free person, from the person who loves freely—that is, who freely affirms his being, his identity, by means of communion with other persons (p. 18).

Within the spirituality of the eastern Church, it is in the celebration of the Eucharist that humanity encounters the historical manifestation of this Trinitarian and Christological communion. Above all it is through humanity’s participation in the Eucharist that they come to share in divine communion and in so doing pass from what Zizioulas terms the hypostasis of biological existence to the hypostasis of ecclesial existence.

The “hypostasis of biological existence” is that which in human life is constituted by “conception and birth.” Though “not entirely unrelated to love,” the biological hypostasis nevertheless “suffers radically from two ‘passions’ which destroy precisely that towards which the human hypostasis is thrusting, namely the person” (Zizioulas, p. 50).

The first passion that the biological hypostasis suffers is “ontological necessity.” Simply put, I do not come into existence by my own choice. I cannot therefore affirm my own existence “with absolute ontological freedom” (p. 50). “How,” to echo a central

question of the existentialist movement, “can a man be considered absolutely free when he cannot do other than accept his own freedom?” (p. 42)

The second passion is that of “individualism” which in its last stage we call “death.” As a biological hypostasis, the individual is self-affirming only through “separation” from others.

Death becomes tragic and unacceptable only when man is regarded as a person. As a biological event death is something natural and welcome, because only in this way is life perpetuated. In the natural world “personal” identity is ensured by childbearing, by the “survival” of the parents in the faces of the children. But this is not the survival of persons; it is the survival of the species, which may be observed equally in the whole animal kingdom and is directed by the harsh laws of natural selection. . . . If through all this being survives finally as “substance” or as the “species” of man, what does not survive is the concrete and unique identity, the person (p. 47).

Under the law of the biological hypostasis, for “me” to survive requires, that “you” die. Likewise, “my” death is essential for there to be room for “you” to live. Biological existence then is ultimately predicated upon physical death, the final and definitive separation of “you” and “I.”

Unlike the biological hypostasis, the ecclesial hypostasis is constituted “without ontological necessity”; in other words, it “does not suffer from createdness. This is the meaning of the phrase in Scripture about being born ‘anew’ or ‘from above.’ (John 3:3,7).” Summarizing the soteriological implications of patristic Christology, Zizioulas affirms that,

Thanks to Christ man can henceforth himself “subsist,” can affirm his existence as personal not on the basis of the immutable laws of his nature, but on the basis of a relationship with God which is identified with what Christ in freedom and love possessed as Son of God with the Father. This adoption of man by God, the identification of his hypostasis with the hypostasis of the Son of God, is the essence of baptism (p. 56).

For our concern here, it is the last phrase of this quotation that is most important. We pass from ontological necessity and death to freedom and love by way of baptism. In other words, liturgy serves **transformative** and not merely **commemorative** or **catechetical** purposes. Zizioulas’s insight represents the foundational (in the sense of founding, or paradigmatic) insight of an Eastern Orthodox Christian liturgical spirituality.

Zizioulas is aware that, experientially, baptized Christians still suffer from the passions of the biological hypostasis. In making this admission he is rejecting both idealism and gnosticism. What then is the relationship between the biological hypostasis and the ecclesial hypostasis?

[T]here is no question of the ecclesial hypostasis, the authentic person, emerging as a result of an evolution of the human race, whether biological or historical. The situation created by the expectation and hope of the ecclesial identity, by this paradoxical hypostasis which has its roots in the **future** and its branches in the present, could perhaps have been expressed by another ontological category, which I would call here a **sacramental** or **eucharistic hypostasis** (p. 59).

Methodologically, because Zizioulas is not primarily concerned with praxis he overlooks the essential relationship between communion and asceticism. To return to an earlier

distinction, while he **understands** the relationship between human freedom and communion, he fails to **explain** the relationship empirically.

Such an explanation is a necessarily compliment to our understanding precisely because our life of communion, because it is personal and dynamic, is not, and cannot be, imposed upon us. Nor, because communion is a free gift of free persons, on the other hand, can we strictly speaking say that we create communion. Rather, when we come face to face with the Other, we come to understand that

In spite of [our] free subjectivity, [we experiences ourselves] as being at the disposal of other things, a disposal over which [we have] no control. First of all, being constituted as transcendental subject, [the human person] is in the presence of being as mystery, a mystery which constantly reveals itself and at the same time conceals itself. . . . [Humanity's transcendentality is] a relationship which does not establish itself by its own power, but is experienced as something which was established by and is at the disposal of another, which is grounded in the abyss of ineffable mystery (Rahner, 1978, p. 42).

In the face of this ineffable mystery, the eastern Church has responded ascetically. To understand why this is so, we will now turn our attention to a brief analysis of asceticism.

Asceticism: Training in Freedom and Love

In the Orthodox tradition, the goal of asceticism is the liberation of the person from the power of sin and death. As Chyassvgiss (1990, pp. 49-50) points out, in this process "obedience is the fundamental prerequisite . . . , being identified with 'the mortification of the will' (cf., Phil 2.8)" In the Church's life, obedience is not (ideally) a mechanical submission to the will of an authority figure. Rather, obedience, in a manner reminiscent of our discussion above of conformity, is rather a "loving trust and personal relationship which **in itself** reveals the presence of Christ" (pp. 50-51). Understood theologically, obedience is freely chosen cooperation (*synergy*) with the God Who "voluntarily chooses to risk moving out, 'erotically,' in search of the lost human being." Whatever the context, obedience is meant to be our **response** to God's invitation (p. 50).

Our response to this invitation then, is only meaningful if it is freely offered. Yet it is difficult for many people to understand what it is meant by freedom in the Orthodox context. The reason for this difficulty is the contemporary tendency to objectify and idolize the individual and his/her yearning for absolute autonomy.

The problem of freedom, therefore, is from beginning to end one of discrimination between personal liberty and limitations, between genuine and utilitarian authority. Such a dilemma, however, presupposes a dynamic revision of attitude, a true repentance. For the Church does not aim at the security of the individual, whether in this life or the next. The most appropriate language for describing such freedom is that of selfless love: it is the active love that is at all times prepared "to find a leper, and give him one's own body and take his" (p. 54)

The full implications of what the Orthodox tradition means by active, selfless love is beyond the limits of this paper. Nevertheless, we will be guided by this notion of asceticism as formation in active, selfless love (that is, communion). To help us understand how asceticism can form us in communion, we will look briefly at the example of fasting.

Christos Yannaras (1986) argues that the fasting practices of the Orthodox Church transfer the everyday question of what to eat from the individual to the communal realm. In so doing, the fasting serve to temper the typical human self-centeredness as it is embodied and fostered in the everyday act of eating (pp. 115-116).

The liturgical hymnography of the eastern Church expands this communal orientation of fasting so that fasting takes on both a soteriological and a cosmological significance, thus trans-signifying the role of individual decision making. One of the clearest liturgical examples of this trans-signification of human action is found in a hymn sung at Matins on Cheese Fare Sunday the last Sunday before Lent). The hymn makes a connection between Adam's sin in the Garden and Christian obedience in fasting.

When Adam received of the food, as a transgressor was he driven from paradise. But Moses, purifying the pupils of his eyes with fasting, was made worthy to behold God. Wherefore, you who long to dwell in paradise, come, let us keep far from unprofitable food; and you who desire to see God, come let us fast the four Mosaic tens.

But while the emphasis on fasting is clear in the tradition of the eastern Church, what is often overlooked is that the Church's rules on fasting are complemented by rules on **feasting**.

Just as there are days on which Orthodox Christians are called to abstain from certain foods, there are other days on which they are commanded not to fast--for example, Bright Week, the week after Pascha (Easter). While fasting suggests that reformation comes through abstaining, the requirement to feast suggests that even joyfulness is itself not obtained by self-will but through submission to the **shared** life of the Church.

What these examples point to is that asceticism is in fact a means of *kenosis* or "self-emptying" in the service of self-fulfillment as a being-in-communion with others. It can be difficult, especially in an age that glorifies self-aggrandizement and exalts individual autonomy as the highest good, to understand how self-emptying can lead to anything other than a feeling of inadequacy and alienation, much less communion. And yet as Mary Douglas (1982) scathingly observes:

The strangest conceit of all is that modernization has endowed us with greater freedom of choice than our parents. The evidence for greater freedom of individual choice, apart from sexual matters, has to be carefully dissected. The idea is a central liberal axiom upon which important institutional structures rest. . . . Psychologists have long liked to believe that we moderns work out our intellectual problems by systematic inference, while primitive thought and behavior run in institutionalized grooves. . . . [This view] has to be reconciled with a daily lament against the dull uniformity of our lives--the same menus, the same clothes, the same sports, and the same homes. Where is free choice? Our Viking ancestors had much more of it, free to spend a few years in Greenland, nip back to Scandinavia to help a political ally, or join a raid to Britain (p. 35).

To help overcome at least my own cultural conceit, it is necessary that I briefly digress from our main interest and look for a moment at the Hasidic inspired social scientist Mordechai Rotenberg. In his seminal text *Dialogue with Deviance: The Hasidic Ethic and Theory of Social Contract* (1983), Rotenberg offers us some insight into the Jewish understanding of human society that can help us understand how asceticism, as an act of

self-denial, works to foster communion. Pastorally, I've have found that Rotenberg's work is of great value in explaining to people (both inside and outside the eastern Church) how asceticism serves to foster communion. It is for this reason that we now turn to Rotenberg's work.

Self-Contraction in Hasidic Jewish Thought

Rotenberg through out this work is interested in exploring nonegoistic ways of human living. In his own words, the purpose behind his study is "to 'social-scientize' Judeo-Hasidic ethics" (p. xi). Rotenberg understands himself to be a translator of a classical spiritual tradition ("Jewish salvation ethics") into a social-scientific paradigm he calls "social contraction" (p. xiii).

Rotenberg differentiates social contraction theory from what he terms the popular Western Christian "deterministic-dualistic and Oedipal system of unilateral change which posits an interaction model in which the father/God (i.e., the adult) does not change." According to the Hasidic "monistic model of mutual contraction, interaction is bilateral, because man can influence heaven and son may change father." Thus "by emulating the Divine, one's personal and social development depends not on an ego-centered *construction* of the self, but on one's inter- and intrapersonal self-**contraction** and opening up to let the natural and social world infiltrate and imbue one's being" (p. xv).

Unfortunately, a complete survey of Rotenberg's thought is beyond the scope of the present work. In keeping with the practical orientation of this discussion we will focus our attention on the aspect of Rotenberg's work (pp. 69-79) that is most directly applicable to our interest in exploring the relationship between communion and asceticism: interpersonal contraction and alter-centered individualism (i.e., making oneself small to allow room for the other to grow large).

Interpersonal contraction is undertaken in emulation of the Divine. The two central constructs from cabalistic-Hasidic thought that explain this emulated Divine activity are *tsimtsum* (contraction) and *hitpashtut* (expansion). According to cabalistic thought these two terms

refer to a divine rhythmic process that comes to explain the creation and maintenance of the universe, [they] explain also, . . . how through this symbolic process of *tsimtsum*, the deity withdrew, so to speak, into himself in order to **make room** for the material and human world. . . . [This] continuous process of divine retreat is not, depicted as a one-time, terminal withdrawal that separates once and for all the sacred from the profane, but is a two-fold process of *tsimtsum* and *hitpashtut*, whereby divine light streams back into the divine realm and flows out to the world. Thus, the act of divine shrinkage and evacuation is paralleled by an act of reaching out and embracing, . . . [which] might be equated . . . with an enormous process of divine inhalation and exhalation, much like the human act of breathing (pp. 72-73).

Rotenberg describes this general dynamic of personal absence and presence as a process of *bitul ha'ani* (designification of self) or *anvah* (humbleness) and *achdut* and *hitkalelut* (unification and generalization).

It is important to bear in mind that in Hasidic thought the designification of the self is not an end in itself. Rather, this "de-egoistic process" is in the service of becoming

“indifferent to [my own] personal needs” and thus coming (paradoxically) to “a new sense of strength.” It is this new sense of strength that makes it possible for the *zaddik* (saint) to live a life that is alter-centered, a life that makes room for others to grow (pp. 72-79).

Later in the text, Rotenberg quotes the Hasidic saint, the Maggid, by way of illustrating what is meant by alter-centered individualism and interpersonal contraction. Referring to the father/son relationship, the Maggid offers the following explanation:

Through your actions and humbleness you should cause the Almighty also to contract himself and reveal himself to you in smallness. As in the case of the father who sees his son playing with nuts, and then due to his love he plays with him, although for the father this seems a childish act of “smallness,” nonetheless out of love for his son and so that he should receive pleasure from his son, he contracts his mind and remains in “smallness” so that the little one will be able to bear him, for if he would have been unable to bear his father, then the father would not have derived pleasure from him (p. 82).

If we transpose Rotenberg’s work, and especially this story from the Maggid into the realm of Christian spirituality, what do we discover?

Eastern Christian Spirituality Through Hasidic Eyes

First, in asceticism I give myself symbolically over to the other (in this case the ascetical tradition of the Church). In so doing I am making myself small and trusting that others will not exploit my vulnerability. In other words, asceticism, as a mode of self-contraction, conceals within itself the hope that the other will also not be egocentric, but will respect my vulnerability and respond by making themselves small on my behalf. This leads us to the second point.

This trust in the other (whether person or project) conceals within itself the **hope** that the other will grow and become more than s/he is now. To make use of the Maggid’s illustration, in conforming himself to his son’s (appropriately) childish ways, the father expresses his trust and hope that his son will eventually become an adult and continue the “de-egoistic process” and by of becoming “indifferent to [his own] personal needs” come himself to “a new sense of strength.” The father can only have this sense and hope and trust in the son, he makes himself vulnerable in the presence of his son. Likewise, for his part, the son can only become great (i.e., an adult), if his father is willing to embrace his own vulnerability or smallness.

Rotenberg’s work helped me to see my own tradition with new eyes. For example, as I came to appreciate this “de-egoistic process,” I became aware how is analogous to the theme of divine humiliation and self-emptying in classical Christology. This kenotic Christology is illustrated liturgically in one of the vesperal hymns for the Feast of the Annunciation:

From heaven the archangel Gabriel was sent to announce the Conception to a Virgin. He went to Nazareth thinking within himself and wondering greatly, how it is that he who is the highest and incomprehensible [One] shall be born of a Virgin. He whose throne is heaven, and earth his footstool, how shall he be contained in a woman’s womb? How was he pleased to be incarnate of her by a word only, he whom the six-winged ones and those of many eyes cannot gaze upon? Yea, he who comes is the Word of God. Why then do I hesitate, and not address the

Maiden, saying Hail, O full of grace, the grace of the Lord is with thee? Hail, O spotless Virgin! Hail, O groomless bride! Hail, O Mother of life; blessed is the fruit of thy womb?

Rotenberg's work helps us link anthropology and Christology and lends credibility to a central thesis of this essay that asceticism and communion are essentially linked to each other.

We can see the validity of this thesis, however, only if we give up as normative what Rotenberg calls the "Prussian-Oedipal father" paradigm. In this paradigm self-assertion and not self-contraction is normative. For the Prussian-Oedipal father, the son (who is weaker) must contract, and thus castrate himself in order to become like his inflexible authoritarian father (pp. 81-96). But while Rotenberg's work is fascinating in its own right, we need to return to eastern Christian theologians if we are going to understand and explain the relationship between asceticism and communion.

Asceticism and the End of Individual Virtue

At first, it may seem that Rotenberg's view of humanity being able to influence God would be more compatible with process theology, rather than what is often assumed to be the rather static and (in the pejorative sense of the word) dogmatic theology of the eastern Church. However, this is not true. As the Theanthropos, the God-Man, Christ establishes a reciprocal relationship between God and humanity. Humanity is no longer separated from Divinity, but is instead taken up into the life of the Holy Trinity. This is possible because,

The incarnate Christ is so identical to the ultimate will of God's love, that the meaning of created being and the purpose of history are simply the incarnate Christ. All things were made with Christ in mind, or rather at heart, and for this reason irrespective of the fall of man, the incarnation would have occurred. Christ, the incarnate Christ, is the truth, for He represents the ultimate, unceasing will of the ecstatic love of God, who intended to lead created being into communion with His own life, to know Him and itself within this communion-event. All this removes truth from its Platonic unchangingness and, equally, from the necessity implicit in the Aristotelian "entelechy." History is neither banished in a Platonic manner, nor transformed into a movement inherent in being or "nature" itself (Zizioulas, pp. 97-98).

In patristic Christology and soteriology, not only the human person, but all creation, all matter is "deified." This process of deification is synonymous with human growth in holiness, with freedom from the twin passions of ontological necessity and death, and is the goal of the ascetical life of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

As Yannaras writes, asceticism "consists in conformity to the example of Christ, who willingly accepted death so as to destroy death." Shifting from a Christology to an anthropology, he continues:

Every voluntary mortification of the egocentricity that is "contrary to nature" is a dynamic destruction of death and a triumph for the life of the person. The culmination comes when man shows complete trust by handing over his body, the last bastion of death, into the hands of God, into the embrace of the "earth of the Lord" and into the fullness of the communion of saints (pp. 115-116).

When conformed to Christ, human behavior takes on a new depth of meaning that transcends what is naturally possible. Through the ascetical life the human person becomes increasingly open to the will of God and, by mutual *theandric* love, is transformed after the likeness of Christ (pp. 113-116). Moreover, this process is not merely intellectual or “spiritual,” since,

The material body partakes in the perfection of man, in his sanctification. Perfection and sanctification signify man’s restoration to the fullness of his existential possibilities, to what he is called to be—the image and glory of God. This “end” for human life involves man’s being as a whole, both what we call body and what we call soul; it relates to the totality of the human person (p. 109).

This last observation is important for our consideration of the relationship between communion and asceticism.

We have already seen that true obedience to Christ implies trust. Yet trust alone is insufficient because “obedience freely given always presupposes love: it is always an act of communion” (p. 110). But communion requires a more or less willing process of self-mortification, of moving beyond our typical modes of egocentricism. To borrow from Rotenberg’s work, communion assumes a de-egoistic process and indifference to our own personal needs, of willingly making oneself small, of taking up a life of self-contraction, in order that others might grow large.

In the eastern Church, this social orientation of asceticism (which is often overlooked in favor of triumphalism) is critical because, as Yannaras observes, the goal of what we might term ascetical self-contraction is not to grow in individual virtue. Rather, “Christian asceticism is above all an ecclesial and not an individual matter. It is the changing of our nature’s individual mode of existence into a personal communion and relationship, a dynamic entry into the community of the life of the body of the Church” (p. 109). In other words, asceticism is inherently social and therefore also liturgical and ecclesial in orientation or *teleos*.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that asceticism is **always** bodily. This bodily character of asceticism is not accidental. Nor is asceticism bodily in the sense that all human endeavors are bodily because we are physical beings. Asceticism is a bodily work that strives to check “the rebellion of our material nature and . . . not allow nature to become an end in itself.” Asceticism is the practical means of resisting “the egocentric individuality identical with the flesh, aspects of man’s dynamic struggle to overcome the impersonal elements in his biological nature.” This is accomplished not through individual effort, but by the “submission of the individual to the universal experience and life of the Church.” In the Church, and above all in the Church’s worship, individual effort “is transformed into a common effort; the struggle becomes an act of communion, taking place in the life of the whole body of the Church” (pp., 110-111). The result of this ecclesial mode of conformity is a true “bodily knowledge” of God, a knowledge that can only come through “the bodily asceticism of self-offering” (p. 116)

As envisioned within an eastern Christian perspective, asceticism is the surrender of our individualistic autonomy. This self-surrender makes it possible for us to enter a “relationship of communion . . . [as an act of] obedience to the common will and practices of the Church. (p. 110):

The personal or “erotic” reality of asceticism gives Christian piety the character of a direct, perceptible experience of the incorruption of life, distinguishing it radically

and essentially from the conventional nature of the “achievement” of individual virtue. In a way that is perceptible and experiential, the Christian in his daily life repudiates the autonomy of natural survival; he rejects it as an end in itself in order to receive from God’s love the gift of life, life as personal and loving communion with Him. Thus bodily asceticism defines in a tangible and concrete manner the eucharistic character of the Church’s ethos, the way in which the eucharist, . . . is extended into everyday life (p. 117).

For the eastern Church at least, there can be no communion between God and humanity or humanity with itself, apart from asceticism.

St. Athanasius offers us a powerful and beautiful image that help us understand that to be a being-in-communion, and to be willing to live out that communion in one’s own life. Reflecting on the appropriateness of Christ’s death on the Cross as a public proclamation of God’s love for humanity, Athanasius writes:

[I]f the Lord’s death is the ransom of all, and by his death “the middle wall of partition” is broken down, and the calling of the nations is brought about, how would he have called us to him, had he not been crucified? for it is only on a cross that a man dies with his hands spread out. Whence it was fitting for the Lord to bear this also and to spread out his hands, that with the one he might draw the ancient people, and with the other those from the Gentiles, and unite both in himself. For this is what he himself has said to all: “I, when I am lifted up,” he says, “shall draw all men to me” (quoted in Robertson, 1954, p. 79).

As we reflect on this image, the Christological structure of communion becomes apparent. We can see that the life of communion, especially as embodied in liturgy and the ascetical life, is not a matter of **self-satisfaction** or of “cheap grace.” Rather the trust, care and hope to which we alluded earlier come to us only by way of the Cross. Our trust is a crucified trust, our care, a crucified care, our hope, a crucified hope. As Archimandrite Vasileios (1984) writes:

The world in which man lives according to his nature as a theanthropic entity is the liturgical world. It is not time as represented by history, nor space as represented by creation, nor the logic of fallen man, nor the skill of the unstable individual. Within the Liturgy everything has been changed for the better, tested--that is, broken and restored---through the Cross and Resurrection (p. 67).

For the eastern Church, and really the broad expanse of Christian spirituality, it is the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ that are the central images that dictate for us the path that we must travel if we are to realize our freedom in communion.

An Apophatic Approach to the Study of Spirituality

I began this paper by expressing my own ambiguity about the academic study of human and Christian spirituality. Specifically, I was concerned with how easily spirituality as an academic discipline lends itself to a reductionist approach to spirituality. While not wishing in anyway to disparage either psychological or theologically approaches to human and Christian spirituality, these intellectual ways of knowing need to be balanced by a more existential way of knowing typical of apophatic spirituality.

M. Picard (1952), in his philosophical meditation on the ontology of silence, helps us understand why attend not only to what we know, but to what is beyond what is our intellect. He observes that silence is a basic, irreducible phenomenon in human life (pp. 17-20). Midway through his reflections, he observes that the “human face is the ultimate frontier between silence and speech. It is the wall from which language arises” (p. 99). More broadly, we can say that is through our intellect (of which the spoken word or language is a manifestation) that communion between human beings is possible, because it is only through language (which gives voice to what we know), that the person “becomes more than a mere physical phenomenon and breaks through the limitations” of the body. Though our intellect is foundational, it is silence that makes what we know and say meaningful. Without silence, without a gap between appearance and reality, the human person is divested of mystery and instead becomes merely a “word-machine” (pp. 103, 104).

It is in this gap between appearance and reality that makes manifest the mysterious and hidden depths of our daily life. As the incarnation of this gap, silence embodies our freedom and bears witness to the possibility that our situation can be otherwise. This potential for change means that if “things can be different” then “I can be different,” and thus “we can be together in a different way.” Silence as the guardian of difference points us beyond itself to the disposition of hope and ultimately to human and Christian spirituality as fundamentally mysterious and beyond our own ability to understand (cf., Knowles, pp. 31-38).

An apophatic approach to the study of spirituality, respectful as it is of human freedom, is the “witness of those who would courageously break the bonds of what until then was unspeakable.” Far from robbing the study of spirituality of intellectual content, an apophatic approach to the study of spirituality makes what “was once unsayable and unheard-of is henceforth acknowledged as meriting serious consideration and appraisal” (cf., Maes, 1984, pp. 212-213).

Picard's eloquent words on the relationship between silence and prayer are applicable to our concerns to articulate an apophatic approach to the study of spirituality:

In prayer the word comes again into silence. It is from the very outset in the sphere of silence. It is taken up by God, taken away from man; it is absorbed into silence and disappears therein. Prayer can be never-ending, but the word of prayer always disappears into silence. Prayer is a pouring of the word into silence. In prayer the word rises from silence, just as every word rises from silence, but it comes out of it only to travel straight to God, to the “voice of the ebbing Silence.” (Picard, p. 203).

But silence is powerful only for those who know how to listen, because it is human listening that “is uniquely connected to or is a significant aspect of the evolution of human ideals and values. . . .attentive and appreciative listening is itself a formative . . . process whose origins are deeply sourced in . . . silence (Maes, pp. 212-213). For an apophatic approach to spirituality to be relevant to the academic study of spirituality, therefore, we must know how to listen in an attentive and appreciative fashion to that which is worthy of being heard.

Developmentally, communion is rooted in the infant's conformity to the expectations of our parents. In this sense we can say that we drink in communion along

with our mother's milk. But the past does not exhaust the temporal meaning of communion. Rather the past (as constant and trustworthy) is only the beginning of a life long process in which we grow in what we might term eschatological hopefulness.

This eschatological hopefulness is different from mere optimism or the self-centered conviction that "I" (in opposition to "you") am specially favored by God. Eschatological hopefulness means a looking to a mysterious future fulfillment of Being. This future is mysterious because, as future, it is beyond our ability to know conceptually or intellectually. As such, the future that eschatological hopefulness connects us with is also an invitation to transcend our own self-centeredness (Marcel, 1978).

The trust that is the foundation of communion, is not purely individual, it is also radically social. The risks inherent in a life of communion are not mine alone. Others also risk their own lives by their willingness to accept me into their midst (Knowles 1986). Further a person cannot be true to his responsibility without sacrificing "some portion of his [own] individuality for the greater social good" (L'Homme, 1976, p. 59).

However tentatively, an apophatic approach to the study of spirituality means that one must willingly enter a life formed communally and not individualistically. This act of submission to the community is in the service of our personal and shared accountability for the welfare of each other. To take on this responsibility for the mortality of others is to risk failure. Similarly, to entrust ourselves to others is to risk that they will fail in their care for us.

An apophatic approach to the study of spirituality therefore is more than my attitude; it is a shared reality, an invitation or an appeal to the Other, but divine and human, to enter into a relationship with me. Thus communion is foundationally erotic. It is not without cause that the Old Testament prophets, the Apostle Paul, Christian mystical writers (both East and West) and Christ Himself, have used the metaphor of human sexuality and marriage to express the love between God and humanity.

In this shared process, I become small so that the other might become great, that is discover and embody more full his/her own deepest identity. This requires a real death to self and a renunciation of what is mine by right in favor of serving the Other and his/her growth (self-contraction). This does not happen automatically or by necessity. Rather, an apophatic approach to the study of spirituality reminds us that true communion (i.e., an existential or connatural understanding of the event of human freedom), precludes determinism and requires the free participation of the person; self-contraction must be learned. At least as understood by the Christian East, this learning process, this formation in the apophatic way of communion, is not realized in an instant, but is rather a life-long process of slow and subtle transformation (*theosis* or deification). The result of this ascetical formation is that one comes to a bodily experience of communion with God, the cosmos, others and self.

As an ascetical and apophatic discipline the study of spirituality, in all its facets, is itself also a formation-in-communion. Through our study of spirituality, we are slowly reworked and reshaped. But again, this change is not automatic or forced. Just as liturgy proclaims the ontological truth of our being and interrogates us as to degree to which we are who are liturgical behavior claims we are (Grimes, 1982), so too does our study of spirituality call our own being into question. And, just as liturgy, in and through its *ordo* or the rubrics, stands in this gap between the ontological truth of our being and

the subjective meaning of our actual lived experience, there is always a tension in our research between being faithful to what is most personal and what is most universal, as we strive to give voice to the structures and dynamics of human and Christian spirituality.

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