

Asceticism and the Consumer Society

Consumerism and the Negation of Worship.

Among other things, living our life in Christ requires that we grasp the spiritual significance of two opposing forces with us:

1. **The flesh vs. the body**
2. **The world vs. creation**

In the current social context, and so for this evening's conversation, let me please add another set of opposing movements in the human heart:

3. **Consumerism vs. worship**

Following traditional Orthodox (and orthodox) theology, the first of these terms—the flesh, the world and consumerism—refer to humanity in rebellion against God. Even when we refer to “the world” we are referring to how creation has become disordered by human sinfulness. Because of Adam's sin and mine, my body, the creation and the works of my hands have all become estranged from God. Not only that, they have also become sources for my estrangement. As we have become estranged from God, oblivious to God, the body, created matter and the works of our hands, have become idols. They become the means of endless distraction from the reality of God, of communion with one another, and from both life and death.

Thus the tragic paradox of the fall, the great tragedy of human sinfulness is this: the gifts of God have become distorted. Rather than drawing us closer to Him and to each other, we misuse the good things of God to our own harm, spiritually, morally, psychologically, socially and physically. In the words of the Prophet David:

The idols of the nations *are* silver and gold,
The work of men's hands.
They have mouths, but they do not speak;
Eyes they have, but they do not see;
They have ears, but they do not hear;
Nor is there *any* breath in their mouths.
Those who make them are like them;
So is everyone who trusts in them (Ps 135:15-18).

The second of these terms—the body, creation and worship—are likewise richly anthropological. But here they refer to a way of life built on obedience to God. If idolatry strikes man dumb and breathless, obedience animates him and makes him sing out in the praise of God. Again from the Prophet David:

Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless His name;
Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.
Declare His glory among the nations,
His wonders among all peoples (96:1-3).

Just as our sin obscures our ability to perceive the beauty of creation and our own humanity, our obedience to God renews both and reveals their true beauty (see Romans 8:18-25).

In the theology of the Orthodox Church obedience is our response to God. Broadly speaking this response has two foundations: holy baptism (and really, all the sacraments) and *metanoia*, that change of heart by which we turn personally from our sin and toward the Living God in “faith, hope and love” (see 1 Corinthians 13:13). But repentance is more than turning away from sin. It is turning to God, and allowing Him to renew and transform our very consciousness. It is turning from self-will to obedience, from egocentric “dancing alone” to synergy. It is only through a life of obedience to God that we can rightly exercise the gifts God has given us.

Repentance renews our vision of creation, through our bringing our mind and heart into synergy with God. Fundamental to this obedience is the stewardship of the material world, and its proper use to glorify God. Through repentance God enlightens our hearts to see and know that the eucharistic Bread and wine become Christ’s body and blood; baptismal water is filled with the Presence of the Spirit and sanctifies us; oil of Chrism is sanctified and becomes the means of imparting the Gift of the Holy Spirit. These things, these material elements, are revealed not as ends in themselves, bread simply to be eaten and wine to be drunk, but become the means of communion with God. This sacramental vision ultimately extends to the entire creation, where everything is a means of communion, everything and everyone is filled with grace. It is not the creation that is found, wanting, but rather our hearts, our ability to perceive.

This evening I want to speak with you about the second of the two foundations of the obedient life: repentance. How is it that, in response to divine grace, we can come to live in obedience to God? A second question, and one which I think speaks broadly to the lectures and conversations that have occupied you this week, is this: What does this obedient life mean for us who live in society that has become increasingly materialistic and driven more and more by a desire to consume rather than to sanctify creation eucharistically?

The Orthodox liturgical theologian Fr Alexander Schmemmann was an astute social commentator. In one of his most well respected works, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, he points out that we live a “secular age.” By this he means not that we no longer believe in God or that we reject “some kind of transcendence and therefore of some kind of religion.” No, what contemporary society rejects and negates is **the worship** of the God Who is the source, means and goal of human life. Secularism, for Schmemmann, is “in theological terms ... a heresy ... about man.” At its core this heresy

is the negation of man as a worshipping being, as *homo adorans*: the one for whom worship is the essential act which both “posits” his humanity and fulfills it. It is the rejection as ontologically and epistemologically “decisive,” of the words which “always, everywhere and for all” were the true “epiphany” of man’s relation to God, to the world and to himself: “It is meet and right to sing of Thee, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks to Thee, and worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion...”¹

1 Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), p. 118.

While as religious believers we may disagree among ourselves as to the exact nature, context and form of worship, if we are faithful to our respective traditions as Jews, Christians, and Muslims, we know that our disagreements do not obscure, and more importantly must not be allowed to obscure, our fundamental agreement with the anthropological fact that to be human in the fullest sense is impossible apart from the worship of God.

As an Orthodox Christian, I believe (and I suspect many of you here this evening would agree with me on this) that both “worship in general and the Christian *leitourgia* in particular” presuppose “the *sacramental* character of the world and of man’s place in the world.” Again, the particulars of that are a source of some debate and even disagreement among Christians much less across religious traditions. We ought not to deny this. Nevertheless when we look at “the world, ... it in its totality as cosmos, or in its life and becoming as time and history” the created order is “a means of [God’s] revelation, presence, and power.” To put the matter somewhat differently, the physical creation (and so humanity) “**not only** ‘posits’ the idea of God as a rationally acceptable cause of its existence” it also “truly ‘**speaks**’ of Him and is in itself an **essential means** of knowledge of God and communion with Him, and to be so is its true nature and its ultimate destiny.”²

As St Paul says, “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image... Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts...” Rom 1:20-24.

Man was created with an intuitive awareness of God and thankfulness to Him for the creation. In return, the creation itself was made to be a means of communion and revelation of God to man. Man was thus created as a Eucharistic being, the priest of creation, to offer it in thanksgiving to God, and to use it as a means of living in communion, the knowledge and love of God. Man was created to worship. In our fallenness, turning from God to created things as ends in themselves, we lost the intuitive knowledge of God and our essential attitude of thankfulness to Him. Secularism is rooted in this loss of divine awareness, the darkening of our intuitive perception of the creation as the sacrament of God’s Presence. It is a denial of our essential reality as human beings, and our reduction to purely material animals. Thus the refusal to worship and give thanks, to offer the creation in thanksgiving back to God, is a denial of our very nature as humans.

What Schmemmann is testifying to is that “worship is truly an essential act, and man an essentially worshipping being.” It is “*only* in worship” that I can find “knowledge of God and therefore knowledge of the world.” As the etymology of the word *orthodoxy* suggests, the true worship of God and the true knowledge of God converge and are together become the foundation of obedience to Him.

Asceticism, the Cross and the Healing of the Person

Knowledge in the context of the Orthodox Church’s tradition is not a matter of abstract facts about the world, much less God. Rather knowledge is synonymous with love and intimacy—knowledge in this context means “communion with God and therefore [in God] communion with all that exists.”³

²Ibid., p. 120, emphasis added.

All this is negated by secularism and as a result, the human person is left with a spiritual void that manifests itself concretely as shame and self-loathing. Reflecting on the widespread problem of alcohol and drug addiction in post-Communist Russian society, the bishops of the Orthodox Church in Russia have this to say:

The principal reason for the desire of many of our contemporaries to escape into a realm of alcoholic or narcotic illusions is spiritual emptiness, loss of the meaning of life and blurred moral guiding lines. Drug-addiction and alcoholism point to the spiritual disease that has affected not only the individual, but also society as a whole. This is a retribution for the ideology of consumerism, for the cult of material prosperity, for the lack of spirituality and the loss of authentic ideals. In her pastoral compassion for the victims of alcoholism and drug-addiction, the Church offers them spiritual support in overcoming the vice. **Without denying the need of medical aid to be given at the critical stages of drug-addiction, the Church pays special attention to the prevention and rehabilitation which are the most effective when those suffering participate consciously in the eucharistic and communal life.**⁴

Alcoholism, drug addiction, the normalization of sexual immorality, as well as consumerism, and the pursuit of material prosperity as an end in itself, all of these are symptoms of the deep spiritual void created by secularism.

The fruit of secularism is despair.

I will leave to others better qualified than I to discuss and debate the social history of secularism and how we have come to be held so tightly in its grip. This evening I come to you as a pastor. While as the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America will often and necessarily require of me that I address social issues and matters of public morality, my primary concern always is as bishop and as Christian who God has entrusted with the great work of healing the wounds sin inflicts on the human heart. How does Christ liberate us from the “spiritual emptiness, loss of the meaning of life and blurred” morality that enslave each and every one of us both personally and as a society?

The solution we are looking for is the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is His Cross that heals a fallen creation, a fallen humanity, and me as a sinner. Reflecting on the appropriateness of Christ’s death on the Cross as a public proclamation of God’s love for humanity, St Athanasius the Great 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.”⁵

3 Ibid.

4 *Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, X.6, emphasis in original.

The Christian ascetical life, that is the life of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, the works of mercy and obedience, is the application and the appropriation of the Cross to my life. It is the means by which I both enter into a life of communion with God and become myself a sacrament of that communion for others. This is possible because at its most basic level, asceticism “is the struggle of the person against rebellious nature, against the nature which seeks to achieve on its own what it could bring about only in personal unity and communion with God.” Our “restoration” to a life of personal communion with God and so our personal “resistance” to the powers of sin and death, “presuppose a struggle” within each human heart that is often lacking in contemporary society and even our churches.⁶

This struggle **IS** the ascetical life and as an Orthodox Christian I believe that I cannot effectively preach the Gospel if I neglect my own person *podvig*, my own personal ascetical struggle to live a life in conformity to Christ. So clearly I am not referring here to “just any kind of asceticism.”⁷ Fasting, for example, simply to make ourselves more attractive to others is also a type of asceticism; it is the false asceticism of consumerism that encourages rather than mortifies our egoism. Likewise we can work longer hours so that we can simply own more things. This too is a false form of asceticism because it too is grounded in egoism.

The asceticism that is need to preach the Gospel, and so offer hope and healing to those gripped by the materialism and despair of secularism and the false idol of consumerism, is the kind of asceticism by which we “resist death in our own bodies.” This happens I believe only by our “conformity to the example of Christ, who willingly accepted death so as to destroy death.” As with worship, we may disagree among ourselves as Jews, Christians and Muslim as to the source, content and form of the ascetical life. But is it so daring to say that, on anthropological grounds at least, we agree among ourselves that “Every voluntary mortification of the egocentricity which is ‘contrary to nature’ is a dynamic destruction of death and a triumph for the life of the person” and so society?⁸

Can we not as religious believers and as men and women of good will, in our own lives, in the lives of our respective communities and in our society at the very least foster a renewed appreciation and practice of asceticism?

⁵*On the Incarnation*, trans. Archibald Robertson in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 79.

⁶Christos Yannaras. *The Freedom of Morality*. Trans. Elizabeth Briere. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), p. 112.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁸ Compare, *ibid.*, p. 116.