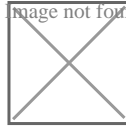


Person and Spirituality (Vasileios T. Gioultsis)

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In recent years, there has been much discussion of the difference which exists between the notions of “person” and “individual”. It may be that the progress of the social and anthropological sciences has provided the spark for this discussion, the starting-point for which is to be found in the well-known philosophical trends of our day. In particular, we see the supporters of Christian personalism and those of existentialism wrestling in particular with the notion of “person”, in an attempt to define its role and spheres of influence and existence.



We need to make a clarification at this point. The recent commotion around the person doesn't mean that it's only recently that people have begun thinking about concerning themselves with its role and about defining the difference between it and “individual”. The initial discussion on the definition of this difference goes back a very long way. It's simply that the issue has re-surfaced today and is a very topical concern.

About fifteen centuries ago, Orthodox theological thinking became aware of this difference, and, taking as its starting-point the distinction between the divine Persons of the Trinity, it defined as the human person the distinct and particular hypostasis, as opposed to the anonymous, natural individual.

The individual, then, is no more than a unit of the species from which they spring and to which they belong from birth to death. This deterministic dependence demonstrates the subjection of the individual to impersonal, collective necessity, which is basically dictated by the laws of nature.

The person, on the other hand, is a unit of psychosomatic features which are above and beyond any naturalistic or biological necessity. The person is an absolute value, a real hypostasis, the image of God in people. It's that distinctive something which, in an inconceivable diversity of forms, makes each person unique and specific. And so, in the whole of human history, it's impossible to find an "exact copy" of any one person.

Two absolutely identical hypostases, two absolutely identical personalities, two absolutely human persons have never existed. Each person is also a separate world. They're a small entity, a small totality analogous to that of the cosmos, a microcosm within the eternal motion of the universe and its history. This is why the person is never something static. It's always to be understood in a social dimension, because it acts in order to encounter its peers and, especially, its prototype, Who is the Triune God.

This motion, which, in sociological terms can be called the expression and role of the person, reveals the existence of "social dynamism" within it. Here, the term is not used in the sense of unconscious sociability, which exists in the whole of the biological creation and is a naturalistic tendency- we would say a necessity of existence- in all animals and even in plants.

Social dynamism is an exclusively human psycho-spiritual function which is a fundamental feature of the personality. It's a dynamic motion, which breaks the barrier of individualism and propels people into the realm of dialogue, into the social dimension. It's a motion that makes people believe in values, to fight for them, to create a culture, to be different from animals. On a horizontal plane, in terms of meeting other people, this motion expresses conscious sociability. Here we'll look at the vertical dimension of the dialogue with God, which expresses spirituality.

So the human person and God are two poles, whose encounter creates spirituality.

There's no duress in this meeting, since people are always free to doubt not only spirituality, but even God Himself. Freedom, then, is a characteristic of spirituality. Spirituality is communication with God, Who isn't, as is often said, naively, the supreme being, but Spirit. And, as Spirit, God appeals to our spiritual experience and hypostasis, to us as persons.

Therefore, for spirituality to be expressed, it needs a spiritual motive, and that is faith, which doesn't depend on human functions, natural or psychological, because otherwise everyone would believe and there'd be no disbelievers. Faith is a free, spiritual experience which is engendered within people when they're convinced of the reason for their existence and for the existence of God. But human existence is indissolubly linked with that of God, to the point where, when we're convinced of the one, we can be certain of the other. Human existence represents the most telling testimony to the existence of God, because, regardless of how greatly we've distorted our selves, we're still images of God, and as such we bear within us all the features of the prototype.

It would be fair recall here the awe experienced by the biological and medical sciences at the perfection of the human body and its functions. This perfection has brought social scientists to acceptance of the human organism as the ideal model for the organization and administration of social groups. But this is only one side of the human mystery, the biological one, which reflects the whole of creation. But there's another side, unknown to the rest of creation and exclusive to humankind. This is the unquestionable reality of the psycho-spiritual reactions which, however much the theory of evolution has attempted to subject them to biological drives, remains a mystery.

Our awareness of incompleteness when faced by the perfect, our interest in the infinite, our thirst for knowledge and creativity, our concern for the investigation of the future and the unknown, are all manifestations of the divine within us. It's the human witness to the existence of God.

This testimony, which had stood the test of time and not been shaken by scientific discoveries and readjustments, nor by the recent crisis in values and moral certitude, has now returned to the forefront of current thinking because of the philosophical and socio-political challenges concerning the reason for our existence, and, as a result, that of God. The surge of nihilism, which has inundated the whole of humanity and swept away institutions and values, was unlikely to leave the notion of spirituality unaffected.

In the last century, we saw the overthrow of the scale of values and its inversion.

The basest became the supreme and the highest were ignored or trampled underfoot. The values of the spirit were called the “opium of the people” and “utopias of the establishment” or “urban daydreams”. In this way, the philosophy of values became the philosophy of utilitarianism. All the expectations, all the dreams, all the legitimate concerns of human societies were lumped together within the sphere of economics and technology, within the politics that has been founded on the lie of prosperity tomorrow, as if people were no more than a stomach and senses.

This misguided view of the spiritual hypostasis of the person, which was forged between historical materialism and capitalism, engendered not only the type of a new human being, but monsters who function between shuttered individualism and mechanical collectivism. These monsters- or, to put it more politely, this new type of person- are orientated towards production, utilitarianism, necessity, expediency; in a word, towards biologism. They ceased to be persons some time ago; they’re individuals, and individuals not in the sense of a social unit, but in the biological understanding. It’s tragic, but it needs to be said: they’re somewhere between being a person and an animal. That may seem a harsh way of putting it, but it loses its harshness if we look at things in the light of historical reality. We don’t need to refer to the distant past; recent events are enough to confirm this.

Some years ago, we saw the dirty war in Biafra, with the genocide of the Ibo tribe. We saw the drama of Czechoslovakia, which was transformed into silent mourning in August 1968. And, among so many other dramatic events which have happened recently, we watched the slaughter of Cyprus, with our hearts in our mouths and bated breath, as we witnessed the murders, the desecrations, the pillage, the imprisonments and the flight to safety of 200,000 people. Humane feelings disappeared from the face of the earth and the spiritual standing of the powerful was called into question. The merchants dealing with whole nations decided at their dinners about the sale and purchase of entire peoples, with the dead from the hostilities represented by a sum total, as if the budget of an enterprise were being settled, with debit and credit.

These are the achievements of people today, who see the world in terms of quantity. People who have torn down spiritual values and have forgotten the reason for their existence. And the result: conflicts, wars, murders, social disturbances, revolutions, unemployment, misery, hunger, uncertainty over the future, immorality, hatred, divorces, suicides, anxiety, heart disease and death.

You might say that God’s forgotten us. But that’s wrong. We’ve forgotten him, or, rather, we’ve left his side. Because, as Saint Basil the Great so aptly put it: “the

farther you move away from life, the closer you move towards death. Because God is life and being deprived of Him is death". So what is required is a return to the source of life, a re-connection with the eternal Spirit, communication with the God of love, a reversion of the image to the original, a dialogue between created and Creator. It's only within such a relationship that restoration of the order which was demolished is possible. It's only in dialogue with God that people find a way out of the cycle of absurdity. And the absurdity will continue as long as people remain individuals and aren't transformed into persons.

This is precisely where we find the significance of the current interest in the discussion surrounding the person. Except that the formulations of the philosophers, although they start off out of interest, never get further than being formulations, and can't progress to being proposals or solutions. What's required is a metaphysical, a spiritual field, which, strange as it may seem, is the only framework capable of providing the opportunity for a rational and supra-rational life for the irrational and absurd people of today. Such a unique framework was given to the world by Christ through His blood, sacrifice, death and resurrection. Within this context, individualism is expunged, self-interest disappears, the lowest of sinners is sanctified by the grace of God and the miracle of fraternity is realized among people. Within this context, tired people, in any era, can find the aim of their existence, the person they really are, peace, and God Himself.

This context is the Church. It's the people of God. It's the faithful who have departed, we who are here now and those who will come. It's the ranks of saints and martyrs who believed in and worshipped the God of love. It's the sheep-pen of the good shepherd, of God Who became a person in order to make us God. He Who bent down over our pain and planted the only hope in the world, when He said to us: "you will have sorrows in the world, but don't be afraid, for I've defeated the world".

Within the sphere of this certainty, the personal struggle of the believer to transform the world can acquire significance. This is a transformation that always begins with the person and has as its aim the expansion of spirituality and the spread of love.

Vasilios T. Yioultsis, *Πνευματικότητα και κοινωνική ζωή* [Spirituality and Social Life], Pournaras, Thessaloniki, pp. 7-15.