

Eastern Theology of Personhood

Recently I have been spending time reading articles that “modern” Eastern Theologians have written. There is a trend, at the present time, to return to the “Fathers of the Church” and to become more Patristic in the Church’s approach to its religious ideas and thoughts while, at the same time, deal with more contemporary issues. It seems that the theology of *personhood* has become one of the distinctive features of Eastern theology in the 20th-21st centuries. This theology springs forth from the return to the Fathers. I feel that if we are ever to truly understand *Theosis*, the focus of Eastern Spirituality, we must address the notion of *personhood*. What does it mean to be a PERSON? Since each of us are PERSONS, we must ask ourselves: What does it mean to me that I am a Person? I suspect that very few of us have ever taken time to think about what it means to be a person and what personhood is. Modern Eastern Theology is attempting to deal with our understanding of what it means to be PERSON in God’s creation. Before you read on, ask yourself: What do I think it means to be a Person? How am I a person?

Eastern Theology of Personhood

The general tendency in Eastern Theology is to conceive of personhood in relationship to the Church. In the Eastern Church we assert that we are **image-bearers of God** and that the purpose of earthly life is to grow in our LIKENESS of the image in which we are created. Of course, this IMAGE must be of Jesus Christ since He is the human form of our Triune God. So, what does this mean and how are we to understand this? Some of the key words that we hear in Eastern Theology/Spirituality are image and likeness of God, personhood and nature, ecclesial communion, the way of being, relational being, Theosis and deification.

I think that one of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary Eastern theology is its teaching about personhood. This is closely connected with the idea about *Theosis* (i.e., *Theosis* is the transformative process whose aim is likeness to or union with God. As a process of transformation, *theosis* is brought about by the effects of personal, fundamental change in thinking and living – personal change and thinking that is meant to make us more like the Person of Jesus). The purpose of earthly life is to more fully actualize the potential we must be more like Jesus. Therefore God choose, in time, to come into the world as a human being in the Person of Jesus so that He could reveal to us how we might accomplish this personal transformation.

While the history and structuring of the Eastern theology of personhood is extremely complex, I propose to simplify this. This theology, which is truly a return to the theology of the Fathers, purports to present a “model” or an “idea” of what personhood is. This “model” or “idea” is directly connected to our ideas of the Trinity, Christ, and the Church. It is this model of personhood which is at work in the ongoing debate on the human person in the Eastern Church. However, I am not suggesting that any one model is correct and others wrong. I’m presenting this issue so that my readers might begin to think about what they truly believe about their own personhood. It is my hope that this article might stimulate some discussion like the last article did.

The Model of Person.

What does it mean that we are **image-bearers of God**? What is the meaning of human personhood? Modern psychology posits that “self-consciousness” amounts to personhood – to know myself as a distinct, unique being. To truly simultaneously see myself as like other human beings and yet unique. The psychology of ‘self-consciousness’, however, fails to think about personhood as our religion does, namely that personhood is given to us in Christ by the Holy Spirit. The event of God’s Incarnation, which asserts that man was created in the image of God, has true meaning for a **believer** and therefore must be considered. Psychology is considered the handmaiden of Theology and Theology, that is the study of belief in God, must also always take into consideration if we are to have a truly comprehensive idea of something like personhood.

Several Eastern theologians, in agreement with modern psychology, expressed the thought that self-consciousness is the source of personhood. This does not consider the revelation of divine-human personhood. Hence divine-human personhood is not addressed and it is individual, human beings that assert what personhood is. The point being that there has been a lack of true understanding of the being of God and being of humankind. The spiritual and historical event of encountering God by virtue of one’s inner divine-human personhood has been jeopardized and forgotten. Religion, and therefore theology, contributes to our understanding of personhood, or at least it should, since the God-factor then enters into the equation. If you do not believe there is a God, then you might assert that “self-consciousness” equals personhood. For a **believer**, however, there must be some consideration given to the thoughts and ideas of theology as well as psychology.

Theological Theory of Personhood

What is the reality of the human person? What is the Eastern Theological understanding of 'personhood'? There are two answers to this question. The first answer is attached to the general theological underpinning of the 'nature of personhood'. The second is the basic elements that constitute the model of divine-human personhood.

The theology of personhood is a result of several fundamental changes in Eastern theology. These changes are common ground to a host of current Eastern theologians.

The first change is the so called 'neo-patristic synthesis'. Returning to the roots of Eastern spirituality is intimately tied to the teachings of the Fathers of the Church. One theologian considers a theologoumenon (i.e., a theological statement or concept in the area of individual opinion rather than of authoritative doctrine) to be an important theological opinion. Accordingly, theologoumena should be regarded as permissible theoretical views if they do not claim obligatory dogmatic authority. The methods of Eastern theology should be intrinsically adequate to the substance of its living, spiritual experience.

This brings us to the second important change of Eastern Theological thinking. It can be labelled as the 'apophatic' way of theology (i.e., known as negative theology, it is a form of theological thinking and religious practice which attempts to approach God, the Divine, by negation, to speak only in terms of what may not be said about the perfect goodness that is God). The early Eastern Fathers of the Church stressed that human reason can never come to a definitive understanding of Who God Is. Therefore, the most that humans can hope to understand is WHAT GOD IS NOT! (e.g., God is not finite; God cannot hate; God cannot be totally comprehended).

The return to the living experience of the Church is the other side of returning to a living God. Thence emerges another major 'postulate' of Eastern personalist theology. Namely, the context for theology is divine-human communion. This implies encountering Christ from 'within' the being of the Church, the Church being the historical extension of His body incarnate. What it means is that theology is a discursive symbolization of the spiritual experience of an encounter with our living God. Therefore, what is properly 'apophatic' is this personal experience of inter-communion with a personal God: a God who is One yet Three, transcendent yet immanent, uncreated yet ecclesially incarnate in history. No rationalistic concept can capture this spiritual event, nor can it do justice to the paradoxical nature of 'revelations' respective to it. That is why the neo-patristic movement of thought warrants a most immanent connection between an apophatic and a personalist approach in theology.

The living God is not a solitary entity. God is Himself a communion of divine persons. Accordingly, Christ as a transformative agent. He is an experience present in us, and we in Christ, by the co-action of the Spirit in the name of the Father.

This has two profound consequences. The first underscores the apophatic point, namely that God is discovered to be not only God-Man but also a triune God. He reveals Himself as three persons sharing one self-same nature. This is another reason why 'reason' fails to render sufficient, spiritual and theoretical justice to such a God. An experience of this triune mystery may be symbolized theologically by an adequate mind. To put it in a nutshell: dogmatic statements are, in fact, theological formulations of this primordial experience. It is difficult, however, for us humans to truly experience God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit unless we truly stop and reflect upon Him as Three-In-One. To think of Him as "Father", as "Brother" and the "Power" within us to do all those things which are God-like (e.g., love, create, imagine).

Hence the mysteries of the Church and the dogmas are two sides of the same experiential encounter event: mystical life and theology are one in the life of the Body of Christ, the Church. The Church represents the objective possibility of apophatic God-knowing, and apophatic God-knowing is the experience of life of the eucharistic body, that is, of life realized with the help of the Spirit of God". (For example, when we think about the Eucharist (i.e., the essence of bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Christ and truly believe that we receive the "essence of Christ when we receive the Eucharist, we are changed. The problem is: Do we really think about this when we receive Holy Communion? If not, why not?)

A third important change of mind set indicates that next to the divine-human context of Eastern theology, that is the Trinitarian context of divine-human communion, is another essential point of departure for the theology of personhood. Since by communion with the person of Christ one re-discovers his divine-human person, it follows that human personhood is not only Christ-like but also Trinity-like. Christ does nothing alone or by Himself. The energies of Christ always entail action in unity with the other two divine Persons. This means that the Christology of personhood is discovered to be most immanently connected to a triadology of personhood for humanity is created as an image of God in Christ by the Spirit. This implies that Christian anthropology is to be grounded Christologically and triadologically and, by extension, pneumatologically ("spirit-filled) — all within an ecclesial

setting. For example, when we receive Holy Communion with true belief, we see ourselves in relationship with a “Father”, a “Brother” and “a Power” to truly be human as God intended when He created us in His Image.

This calls for an ‘ecclesiological anthropology’. “The triadic Proto-Image of the truth of man is the way of existence of Christ, that is the unity of the Church.” The person created in the image of Christ is a communal structure. Because Christ is in communion with the Father and Spirit — and with our humanity invited to commence becoming the Church. We must begin to experience of a triadic relationship between GOD-US-OTHER HUMAN BEINGS.

The encounter with a triune God revealed through life in Christ is made possible, by the Spirit, by entering the Church through the process initiation. In the sacraments of Initiation, the structure of the Trinity is made the structure of the person being initiated. The potential of the so-called ‘person of Initiation’ is fully realized in the eucharist: actualized, as it is, in the so called ‘eucharistic person’ (*this is why in the East we Baptize, Chrismate give Eucharist at the time of Initiation*). The eucharistic event, taken as communion with the life-giving being of God, not only reveals but realizes the communal and relational structure of personhood. “Man corresponds to his being created in the ‘image of God’ to the extent he realizes his being as self-transcendence and self-offering, that is, to the extent his being corresponds to the personal way of existence” The Eastern theology of personhood implies an understanding of the personal way of being God. It is not to be regarded merely as a psychology or sociology of Christian personhood. For this reason, the Eastern theology of personhood grounds itself not in a ‘revelational’ model of Christianity but in an ‘eucharistic’ or ‘liturgical’ model.

Ecclesiology, with its ‘heart’ in the eucharist, is the most central point of reference for the theology of the person. This is so because the eucharist - being the manifest life of God Himself - allows both the re-discovery of the communal being of one’s otherwise naturalized and individualized personhood and, simultaneously, the experience of its potential for transformation through the deifying grace of the incarnate Christ by the Spirit.

The neo-patristic turn of Eastern theology has resulted in a striving to overcome essentialist, rationalistic and moralistic encapsulations of the ‘encounter event’ with the person of the incarnate Christ in the eucharist. This has led to a re-conceptualization of the understanding of the nature of ‘asceticism’.

Ascesis is not just a rigorous execution of moral norms connected to biblical precepts. It is a change of our way of existence: a fundamental change of mind and heart - metanoia - in terms of discovering life for others as the ascetic life proper. This coincides with rediscovering the way of personhood — the communal-relational and ecclesial ‘essence’ properly of being a human being. By discovering the spiritual movements of personhood as relational movements of God ‘with’ us and of God ‘within’ us, we rediscover what is offered in the ecclesial and eucharistic habitus of our personal transformation. Since both movements of personhood and movements of the eucharistic event are complementary as actions of being-for-another. Ascetic life, then, is a life of true self-discovery, in and by our life in the Church, of a living triune personal God — a God incarnate, sacrificial and resurrected.

Repentance or metanoia is not merely a moral decision executed through a moralistically preset protocol. It is a willed effect of our in-ecclesialization. That is, repentance regarded spiritually, entails a change of our way of being according to the way of being of a personal, communal and loving God sacrificing all that is His for the life of others. To live eucharistically is ascesis *par excellence*.

Being and relationship are necessarily wedded pre-conditions for the nature of personhood. And, both are derived from the fact that we are image-bearers of God, that is, of Christ. Simply stated, if God does not exist, the person does not exist, “Personhood” carries all that a man or woman is or may become: the whole of his or her being, including its potential for all manner of development. But it does so as a person. This means that a being is humanly personal if ‘carried’ from ‘within’ by a personhood. The person proper is not to be conflated with the image of God in man, although they most intimately do implicate each other. The image of God in man is conceptualized as self-governance - freedom of the will. Since the human being is hypostatic, this means that the image as freedom is personal. That is to say, the image always belongs to someone in terms of personal responsibility. The image is simply personal. This allows for freedom to be non-abstract and concrete. There is no person ‘in general’ and there is no freedom in abstract. If rational freedom and self-governance are the formal conditions of the image of God in the human being, then the likeness of that image to God is the essential condition. For it is achieving the likeness of the image of God to God that makes the image actualized or properly energized. This is done by the free and willing ascetical acceptance of deifying grace, which is communicated by the Spirit in and through the life with Christ the God-Man in the Church.

Thus, the image can become similar or dissimilar, to the extreme limits: that of union with God, when deified man shows in himself by the grace of God what God is by nature. Actualizing the image through likeness leads to

deification of the human person in cooperation with God. But this cooperation presupposes a level of repentance. Repentance is synergy with God.

The glory of the Lord is being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. Furthermore, the human being has a common nature shared with others. Nature is what is (1) common, but (2) essentially, to all humankind and what makes it specifically different from all other kinds of being. That is to say, the human being is 'part' of nature, but the nature of the human being is not identical to 'nature' as such. Most importantly, the or the human person as image of God, allows humanity to be or become free. The reason for this lies in the fact that the personal hypostasis is a divine-human structure.

The human image is an analogy of the image of God. What God pre-eternally is in His being — man and woman are invited to become by grace. This way of being is the way of personhood. What is more, God and man are 'mutual paradigms' precisely by sharing personhood which is given on both sides as the condition of the encounter event. God is a (1) relational communion of (2) unique and particular Persons sharing one nature or divine being and (3) of free love.

Humanity - very concrete human being - is an interpersonal body in communion as an image of God. This means that the image of God in man and woman is an image of the triune God. That is why realizing and discovering the way of personhood coincides with retrieving the Trinitarian and then Christological side of Eastern ecclesial anthropology. This means that the theology of personhood is a precondition for properly grounding ecclesiology. In the event of eucharistic communion God is encountered as a triune communion of Persons, and we are united in Christ by the Spirit and embraced by the Father. This demands that we open ourselves for personhood as relational life for the other in pure self-sacrificial love. What is more, the image of the triadic Proto-Image is stamped during the creation of the human being: the human being is created in order for a loving personal communion with God.

The goal of this theological thrust of thinking coincides with articulating the goals of personhood proper. These are the following: to regain likeness to God of the image-bearing human person through deification (theosis).

Deification is the apex of the process of making the personal image alike to the triune God. "Deification, that which includes both 'activity of heart' and 'activity of mind', finally shows itself to be a process of self-gathering and grace-imbued self-transcendence of man". Deification is not a restitution of original nature. Rather, it is a dynamic and non-predetermined process and this process is the "purpose" of earthly life.

Due to its ascetical and liturgical dimension this process strongly implies an interpersonal spiritual culture of co-creating, nothing less than what is revealed in the glorified human nature of the Logos incarnate — Jesus Christ, in whom all things are recapitulated, not 'finished off' but begotten, allowing for the eschatological prospect of creating and co-creating a new being in a 'cosmic' sense: from 'glory to glory' by the Spirit in the name of the Father. The aspect of creating a spiritual Christian culture. This demands growth not only of awareness of its meaning and potential but also of responsibility towards making this culture relevant for the domains of social history. This means that the theology of personhood is critical, predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren".

The theology of personhood, which has become one of the distinctive features of Eastern theology, should be positioned in relation to its primary context of reception and re-reception. The model of personhood is thereby presupposed into the basic frame of its critical development. What should personhood, image and likeness, human nature be. Humans, who are an 'image of God', exist as God Himself exists, and are called to grow in God's likeness. Salvation amounts to merging of the triune personhood with the divine-human communion within the context of Church, thus allowing for and leading to an understanding that the primary value of knowing is appropriated as a function of salvation. In other words, knowledge is existentially potentialized as a dynamic function of salvific communion with God. It is for this reason that Trinitarian thought is brought into dynamic personhood.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware states this: What is the human person? What does it imply to be a person-in-relation according to the image of God the Holy Trinity? What does it mean to attain deification through incorporation into Christ?

So, what does it mean to you that you are a person and the personhood is what continues for all eternity once the physical body decays? What did you think about the fact that there is a divine-human dimension to your personhood? How do you see the "relational" aspect of true personhood? What does it mean to you that you are in "relationship", through your personhood, to a Triune-God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit?