

THE VIEW OF MAN IN THE CHRISTIAN EAST

The view of man prevailing in the Christian East is based upon the notion of “participation” in God. Man has been created not as an autonomous, or self-sufficient, being. His very *nature* is truly itself only inasmuch as it exists “in God” or “in grace.” Grace, therefore, gives man his “natural” development. This basic presupposition explains why the terms “nature” and “grace,” when used by Byzantine authors, have a meaning quite different from the Western usage. Rather than being in direct opposition, the terms “nature” and “grace” express a dynamic, living, and necessary relationship between God and man, who are different by their *natures* but are in *communion* with each other through God’s energy, or grace.

According to Maximus the Confessor, God, in creating man, “communicated” to him four of His own properties: being, eternity, goodness and wisdom. Of these four *divine* properties, the first two belong to the very essence of man. The third and the fourth properties are merely *offered* to man’s willful aptitude.

The idea that his “participation” in God is man’s particular privilege is expressed in various ways and consistently in the Greek patristic tradition. Irenaeus, for example, writes that man is composed of three elements: body, soul and Holy Spirit. The Cappadocian Fathers speak of an “efflux” of the Holy Spirit in man. Gregory of Nyssa, in his treatise *On the Creation of Man*, attributes to man the “beatitude of immortality,” “justice,” “purity.” Gregory writes “God is love and the source of love”. The Creator of our nature has imparted to us the character of love. If love is absent, all the elements of the image are deformed.”

Thus, the most important aspect of Greek patristic anthropology (i.e., the study of human biological and physiological characteristics and their evolution) , which will be taken for granted by the Byzantine theologians throughout the Middle Ages, is the concept that man is not an autonomous being – that his true humanity is realized only when he lives “in God” and possesses divine qualities. To express this idea, various authors use various terminologies, yet there is a consensus on the essential *openness* of man - a concept which does not fit

into the Western categories of “nature” and “grace.”

Maximus the Confessor states that the “natural” participation of man in God is a challenge and man is called to *grow* in divine life. Divine life is a gift, and also a task which is to be accomplished by a free human effort. This polarity between the “gift” and the “task” is often expressed in terms of the distinction between the concepts of “image” and “likeness.” In Greek, the term *homoiosis*, which corresponds to “likeness” in Genesis 1:26, suggests the idea of dynamic progress and implies human freedom. To use an expression of Gregory Palamas’: Adam possessed “the ancient dignity of freedom.” Thus there is no opposition between freedom and grace in the Byzantine tradition.

The presence in man of divine qualities, of a “grace” which is part of his nature and which makes him fully man, neither destroys his freedom nor limits the necessity for him to become fully himself by his own effort. Rather, it secures that cooperation between the divine will and human choice which makes possible the assimilation of man to the divine dignity for which he was created.

The understanding of man as an “open being, naturally possessing in himself a divine “spark” and dynamically oriented toward further progress in God, has direct implications for the theory of knowledge and, particularly, for the theory of the knowledge of God.

The “image and likeness” of God in man implies, not only an openness of man toward God but also a *function* and *task* of man in the whole of creation.

Against Origen, the Fathers unanimously affirmed that man is a unity of soul and body. On this point the *visible* world and its *history* were recognized as worthy of salvation and redemption.

According to Maximus, body and soul are complementary and cannot separately exist. this affirmation raises the issue of the soul’s survival after death. This survival is not denied but neither is it understood as a “liberation from the body.” The separation of body and soul at death is as contrary to nature

as death itself. The ultimate and eternal survival of the soul is possible only if the whole man is raised from death at the resurrection. Yet the soul's immortality is not only directed toward the resurrection of the whole man. It is also conditioned by the soul's relationship to God.

The spiritual literature of the Byzantine East frequently speaks of the "death of the soul" as a consequence of rebellion against God (i.e., sin). Gregory Palamas writes: "We ourselves are dead and, before the death of the body, we suffer the death of the soul; that is to say, the separation of the soul from God."

Obviously, the dual nature of man is not simply a static juxtaposition of two elements, a mortal body and an immortal soul. It reflects a dynamic function of man between God and creation. One author, describing the anthropology of Maximus, writes that Maximus seems to stress the independence of the elements (i.e., soul and body), not primarily in order to maintain the immortality of the soul in spite of its relationship to the body, but in order to underline the creative will of God as the only constitutive factor for both, as well as for their unity. Man is truly man because he is the image of God, and the divine factor in man concerns not only his spiritual aspect but the whole of man, soul and body.

While these thoughts may raise a multitude of questions, the essential understanding must be that since man is made in God's image, the body-soul entity remains forever in the mind of God for each individual and death does not change that unity. Since each person remains forever in God's consciousness, the union of body and soul also remains forever. Again logic can't prove this but faith maintains this.

The majority of Byzantine theologians describe man in terms of a three-fold scheme: spirit (or mind), soul and body. Their scheme is very directly concerned with the notion of participation in God as the basis of anthropology.

Theocentrism (i.e., having God as a central focus) appears in Irenaeus' use of Pauline three-fold scheme: Spirit, soul, body. Under Origen's influence, the Fathers of the fourth century followed by the later Byzantine authors, prefer to speak of mind, soul and body. The desire to avoid ambiguity concerning the identity of the

"spirit" and to affirm the created character of the human "spirit" may also have contributed to this evolution. But even then, the terminology of Origen and Evagrius was unsatisfactory because the concept of "mind" was connected with the myth of eternal pre-existence. (*the word myth does not designate untruth. A myth is the formulation of something that people believe*). Although it reflected satisfactorily the theocentric aspect of patristic anthropology, this terminology failed to emphasize the function of man in the visible world. Thus, in Maximus, the human *mind*, though certainly understood as the element *par excellence* connecting man with God, is also seen as a created function of man's created, psychosomatic unity.

The *mind* is not so much a "part" of man as (1) the ability which man possesses to transcend himself in order to participate in God; (2) the unity of man's composite nature when it faces his ultimate destiny in God and in the world; and (3) the freedom of man, which can either fully develop if it finds God or become defective if it submits itself to the body. The "spirit" in human nature corresponds most nearly to the person. Maximus is able to express his conviction that there is a personal aspect in man's life, which goes, as it were, beyond his nature and represents his inner unity as well as his relationship to God." This concept of the person irreducible to nature or to any part of it, is a central notion in both theology and anthropology.

As image of God, man is lord of creation and "microcosm." This second concept, which was widely used in the Greek Philosophy of Plato and the Stoics, was adopted by the Cappadocian Fathers and given a Christian dimension: man is a "microcosm" because (1) he unites, in his personal existence, the intelligible and sensible aspects of creation; (2) he is given by God the *task* and *function* to make this unity ever more perfect when forces of disintegration and division are also actively at work in creation. On this point, and especially in Maximus, we find another aspect of the polarity of image-likeness: God's gift to man is also a task and a challenge.

The central role of man in the cosmos is also reflected - better perhaps than in any system of concepts - in Byzantine liturgy with its emphasis on the union of heaven and earth, its

sacramental realism, its rites of blessing food, nature and human life, as well as in the affirmation that, by nature, man is closer to God than are the angels themselves. The idea originates in Hebrews 1:14, and is developed by Gregory Palamas in the context of an Incarnational theology: "The Word became flesh to honor the flesh, even this mortal flesh. Therefore, the proud spirits should not consider themselves, and should not be considered, worthy of greater honors than man, nor should they deify themselves on account of their incorporeality and their apparent immortality.

Among creatures, there is no greater glory than to be the Lord of all creation. Man is given this glory if he preserves in himself the image of God - that is, if he partakes in the life and glory of the creator Himself.

In order to understand many major theological problems which arose between East and West, both before and after the schism, the extraordinary impact upon Western through of Augustine's polemics against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum must be fully taken into account. In the Byzantine world, where Augustinian thought exercised practically no influence, the significance of the sin of Adam and of its consequences for mankind was understood along quite different lines.

In the East man's relationship with God was understood as a communion of the human person with that which is *above nature*. *Nature*, therefore, designates that which is, in virtue of creation, distinct from God. But nature can and must be transcended. This is the privilege and the function of the *free mind*, made "according to God's image."

Although I realize that this article can be rather dense in part, think about what it is trying to share with us: the relationship between God and man is a "cooperative" relationship. God wants man to become all that is possible for him to be. To this end, God gives many multiple opportunities to deepen his relationship with Him. This is essentially accomplished by humans first and foremost recognizing their relationship with the creator and doing everything within their power to proclaim this truth.

I would ask you to not be discouraged in reading this article. Just ask yourself: What is the

author attempting to say? Is it about the real relationship that exists between man and God? I truly believe that the Great Fast is designed to help us come to a clearer understanding of what it means to be a child of God - to believe that we have been made in His image and likeness. Think about this. It is important, I think, that we learn to embrace and believe that the image that the Eastern Church presents about "who we humans are" in God's creation is important - we are made in His image and can grow in His likeness