The Ascetics of War: The Undoing and Redoing of Virtue

Aristotle Papanikolaou

This article was adapted from the author's chapter in Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War, *ed. Perry T. Hamalis and Valerie A. Karras (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017)*

Forgetting Virtue

There is no "Just War" theory in the Orthodox tradition: on this much, there is widespread agreement. To be more precise, Orthodox thinkers agree that there is no Just War *theory* in the Orthodox tradition, in the form of distinctions between the criteria for *jus in bello*, or right conduct in war, and *jus ad bellum*, the right to go to war. There is also consensus that within the tradition there *is* discussion about the need to go to war. There is debate, however, about how going to war is characterized. For Fr. Stanley Harakas, one of the leading Orthodox ethicists, it is always a necessary evil. For Fr. Alexander Webster, under certain conditions, it is justifiable—which he distinguishes from "just"—and when it is justifiable, it is virtuous and of moral value. This difference, however, reveals a more implicit agreement between Harakas and Webster: although both agree that there is no Just War theory within the Orthodox tradition, both seem to operate within the moral categories and framework of the Just War tradition.[1]

What is remarkable about the entire debate is that there is little attention to what is arguably the core and central axiom of the Orthodox tradition—the principle of divine-human communion. Webster speaks of war as "virtuous," and yet pays absolutely no attention to the tradition of thinking on virtue in either the ascetical writings or in such thinkers as Maximos the Confessor; in both cases, the understanding of virtue is inherently linked to one's struggle toward communion with God, or *theosis*. How exactly is claiming to have fought in a virtuous war, or to have killed virtuously, consistent with an understanding of virtue in light of the principle of divine-human communion? Is it really the case that being virtuous in war means moving *toward* a deeper communion with God? Webster does not give an answer to these questions.

The Vice of War

To affirm that creation was made for communion with the uncreated is to affirm that all of creation is sacramental, always already shot through with the divine presence. There can be no "space" between the created and the uncreated, as it would make no sense to spatialize God. Creation is not given the capacity to "jump over" an abyss to meet the divine presence. Its task is to relate to itself and to God so as to tap its own potential, as a created "thing," to manifest iconically the divine presence already there. Sin is not so much a missing of the target as a blocking of the divine that is "in all things and everywhere present." Whatever the motivation and whichever way it is directed, violence is a

[1] Stanley S. Harakas, "The Teaching on Peace in the Fathers," in *Wholeness of Faith and Life: Orthodox Christian Ethics*, part 1, *Patristic Ethics*, ed. Stanley S. Harakas (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), 154; Alexander Webster and Darrell Cole, *The Virtue of War: Reclaiming the Classic Christian Tradition: East and West* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 2004).

form of blocking of the divine presence, both in a social sense—that is, in the space of human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman relationships—and within oneself. War is pure violence, a set of practices that are unsacramental. Created reality is used to foster division, destruction, denigration, desperation, destitution, and degeneration; put simply, the demonic. This is not to say that there are not godly moments in the midst of war—loyalty, sacrifice, even love. As a whole, however, war is the realm of the demonic.

Given this understanding of divine-human communion, one thing is certain: complicity in violence of any kind is damaging to one's struggle for communion with God. Discussions of "justifiable war" may create the impression that as long as one is on the morally justified side of war, that should be enough to mitigate the existential effects of war and violence. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence to indicate that the "side" one is on makes absolutely no difference to the non-discriminatory effects of violence in war.

The only recent war for which there is little debate about the "right" side is World War II. Yet even in this case, the traumatic effects of combat are all too real. In *Our Fathers' War*, Tom Mathews narrates the effects of World War II on his own father, who, after visiting the ground in Italy where his division fought the Germans and describing his own role, eventually breaks down, saying, "'I killed a lot of people,' . . . in a strangled voice that turned to a sob. 'Jesus Christ . . . I killed so many people.'" Later at a restaurant, Mathews' father looks at him "as if he'd just come out of electroshock. 'What happened back there?' he said. 'I've *never* voiced that stuff. *Never*' . . . 'Not to anyone. Not to myself.'" The father continues the reflection: "I hated the Germans. I did hate them. But it doesn't matter. You look and you see something you hate in yourself, something atavistic, something deep in the bottom of the cortex. You don't feel right. It doesn't make sense. You should feel victorious. You should feel triumph. You don't. Too much has happened. All you know is that you're a killing machine."[2] This confession of the effects of war on Tom Mathews' father comes after a life marked by a strained relationship with his son, infidelity, and addiction. There are more stories from World War II veterans like those of Tom

Mathews, like all who were under the so-called "code of silence" and who fought for the "right" side - or, as Webster would call it, the "virtuous" side - was not given the space to express the effects that war had had on him.[3]

There is no shortage of stories about the trauma of war from soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War, or the most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. One Iraq veteran named John—after a long stretch in which he was showing progress through treatment—cut his fiancée and her mother with a knife after an argument over bus schedules. He then cut himself, telling the police as they walked in, "see, it doesn't hurt." John could not immediately recall the event, but had to be told what had happened. [5]

In August 2010 at 4:00 AM, a rock was thrown through the window of my home randomly by teenagers, as confirmed by a neighbor who heard them outside his window. A few days later, and probably unrelated, the doorbell was rung at my home at 9:00 PM, and when I opened the door, no one was

[2] Tom Mathews, *Our Fathers' War: Growing Up in the Shadow of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 268–69. Emphasis mine.

[3] See *Wartorn: 1861–2010*, HBO Documentary (2010)

[4] See Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994); *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002); Nancy Sherman, *The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of our Soldiers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010); "Life After Death," *This American Life*, July 18, 2008, http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/359/life-after-death; Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009).

there. A few days after experiencing these two events, I was awoken during the night by a dream in which I heard the vividly clear sound of a police radio, and another dream in which I heard the sound of a crystal clear doorbell. In addition to this, for at least a month, I was "jumpy," I made sure that all the lights around the house were turned on in the middle of the night, and I added a timer to the light inside the house so it would turn on in the middle of the night to deter would-be rock throwers. I would close all the shades in the evening, obsessively check all the doors before going to sleep, and wake up frequently in the middle of the night to check outside the window. I am absolutely in no way comparing my experience to combat; but, if something like a rock being thrown through a window can cause one to be mildly symptomatic, I can only imagine the long-term effects of experiencing the incessant violence of guns and bombs.

More than 70 percent of combat veterans from the Vietnam War have experienced at least one of the cardinal symptoms of PTSD at some time in their lives, even if they have not received the full syndrome diagnosis.[6] Those who suffer from combat trauma often experience flashbacks to traumatic events, in which the primary image governing their emotional state is one of violence and impending threat to life. One would hope that sleep would give respite to such suffering, but combat trauma often causes recurring nightmares, and the lack of deep sleep leads to other inevitable emotional disturbances such as increased irritability and a tendency to anger. Beyond the recurring nightmares, combat veterans often simply cannot sleep because they have trained themselves for the sake of survival to be hyper-alert and to react to sounds that may, in combat situations, be life-threatening.

As any good ascetic would know, such training of the body is not simply undone by returning home. What is most damaging to combat veterans who suffer from symptoms of PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Photo: U.S. Air Force/Nadine Barclay.

[5] "Life After Death."

[6] Shay, *Odysseus*, 166.

is the destruction of their capacity to trust, which inevitably renders meaningful forms of bonding with others impossible.[7] If Jesus' greatest commandment was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–39), then experiencing PTSD symptoms simply makes that impossible. What is most demonic about the violence of war is its power to debilitate the capacity to love and be loved.

In addition to PTSD, a new category is emerging in order to distinguish a distinct state of being effected by a combat veteran's participation in war. "Moral injury" is distinguished from PTSD in not being induced through a fear response.[8] Moral injury refers to a state of being in which the combat veteran experiences a deep sense of having violated their own core moral beliefs. It may occur as a result of killing either combatants or non-combatants, torturing prisoners, abusing dead bodies, or failing to prevent such acts; it may also ensue even if there was no way for the combat veteran to avoid doing such acts. In the experience of moral injury, combat veterans may judge themselves to be worthless, unable to live with acts they have committed. Symptoms are similar to those as PTSD: isolation, mistrust of others, depression, addiction, emotional detachment, and negative self-judgments. I have heard countless stories of combat veterans who admit that they are afraid to speak of all that they did in combat situations, for fear that the one to whom they speak will deem them unlovable. In a recent article in The *New Yorker* entitled "The Return," a veteran from the Iraq War is quoted as saying: "I don't want to tell my wife stuff. . . . I don't want her to know that her husband, the person she married, has nightmares about killing people. It just makes me feel like a monster. . . that she'll hate me. . . What kind of person has dreams like that?"[9] In the case of moral injury, it is not self-love as much as self-loathing without any mask of pride that is the obstacle to love.

These and many similar stories and statistics reveal that there is an ascetics to war: either through the training received in the military, or through the practices that one performs in war to train for survival against constant threat of violence, war is the undoing of virtue, as it negatively impacts a combat veteran's capacity for relationship with family, friends, and strangers. As Shay argues, war does not simply cause "lifelong disabling psychiatric symptoms but can *ruin* good character."[10] From the perspective of the principle of divine-human communion, the ruin of good character is not limited to the soul of the combat veteran; character is a relational category and the ruin of character is simultaneously the ruin of relationships.

What Does *Theosis* Have to Do with War?

On the surface, for those who suffer from PTSD as a result of combat or other trauma, talk of *theosis* or divine-human communion seems like a luxury. To some extent, the Orthodox have contributed to this perception of the irrelevancy of *theosis* to those who are in the midst of perpetual suffering, by linking deification to the monastic in the monastery, the desert, or the forest; add to this the tendency to describe *theosis* in supernatural terms—for example, being surrounded by divine light, battling demons, or eating with the bears. On my reading, the only place in the Orthodox tradition

[7] Shay, *Odysseus*, 166.

[8] On moral injury, see Brent T. Litz et. al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009): 695–706; Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012).

[9] David Finkel, "The Return: The Traumatized Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan," *The New Yorker*, September 9, 2013: 36.

[10] Shay, *Achilles*, xiii, 28–35, 169–87.

where one can find stories of mundane *theosis* are in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, such as in the person of Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*, and, ironically, of Leo Tolstoy, such as in the person of Pashenka in his short story "Father Sergius." In order to have any relevancy for the experience of trauma, *theosis* must be de-monasticized and made more worldly.

This more mundane form of *theosis* is rendered possible in the Greek patristic tradition in its linking of divine-human communion with virtue. In both the ascetical writings and those of Maximos the Confessor, communion with God—an embodied presencing of the divine—is simultaneous with the acquisition of virtue. Virtue is embodied deification. In his treatises *Centuries on Knowledge* and *Centuries on Love*, Maximos describes a trajectory of the acquisition of virtues, culminating in the virtue of virtues: love. For Maximos and for Dorotheos of Gaza, the virtue of humility must first be acquired before one can hope to love God and neighbor. *Theosis*, then, is nothing less than the struggle to fulfill this greatest commandment. Insofar as virtue is related to love, virtues build relationships of intimacy, trust, compassion, empathy, friendship, sharing, caring, humility, and honesty. All of this is apparently threatened by the experience of PTSD. Because virtues build relationships while vices destroy them, the ascetics of *theosis* must be relevant to those who attempt to undo the ascetics of war.

If the ascetics of war is an undoing of good character, which is the destruction of the capacity for authentic relationships, then the challenge for combat veterans is to engage in tasks that lead to the *redoing* of virtue, which would increase their capacity for such relationships, and for the embodied presence of the divine. Thinking about the healing of combat trauma along the lines of practices and virtues reveals the intersection of psychological literature on trauma and the ascetical-mystical tradition on virtue. The connecting category consists of practices, since the combat veteran must engage in a new kind of ascetics in order to combat the demonic images impacting their relationships to others as well as to themselves.

One such practice that has been found effective in helping trauma victims is yoga. Bessel van der Kolk has shown conclusively "that ten weeks of yoga practice markedly reduced the PTSD symptoms of patients who had failed to respond to any medication or to any other treatment."[11] To address the effects of violence on learning, the Head Start Trauma Smart program has students engage in such practices as breathing exercises to help regulate anger. It issues breathing stars as rewards, realizing that traditional disciplinary methods based on fear, such as timeouts, are ineffective. The potential of regulating our breathing for helping with anger, depression, and anxiety could perhaps give us a new perspective on the Jesus Prayer.

Key to any redoing of virtue in both the psychological and the ascetical-mystical literature is the practice of truth-telling or confession.[12] Both Jonathan Shay and Judith Herman in their experience with trauma victims attest to the basic truth that healing cannot occur until the trauma victim can begin to speak about the traumatic events. Truth-telling in and of itself is not sufficient for healing, but it is absolutely necessary. Also, truth-telling of trauma cannot begin until a safe and secure environment is established for the trauma victim—what Herman re-

[11] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2014), 207.

[12] See Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Liberating Eros: Confession and Desire," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 26:1 (2006): 115–36; and Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Honest to God: Confession and Desire," in *Thinking through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Scholars*, ed. Aristotle Papanikolaou and Elizabeth Prodromou (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2008): 219–46.

[13] Shay, *Odysseus*, 168.

fers to as stage one of recovery.[13] Once such an environment is established, it is absolutely essential that the victim of combat trauma speak about the truth of the trauma and reconstruct a narrative of the event itself.

Even to speak the truth about the trauma of war can be interpreted as an embodiment of the virtue of humility, in the sense of making oneself vulnerable, requisite to opening the self to loving and being loved. As Shay declares, "The fact that these veterans can speak at all of their experience is a major sign of healing."[14] Reconstruction of the narrative must also take place in the context of other persons, in the form of a community. Much as in Alcoholics Anonymous, the healing power of truth-telling depends not simply on telling the truth, but on who is listening. The rebound effect of truth-telling depends on the symbolic-iconic significance of the one listening. The healing power of this communalization of trauma may not always be staged through face-to-face encounter, but can also be realized, for example, in a community email conversation among Vietnam veterans. In the end, the veterans heal each other.[15]

The affective benefits of truth-telling might also require a listener beyond a community of combat veterans. Shay's "clinical team has encouraged many of the veterans we work with to avail themselves of the sacrament of penance. When a veteran does not already know a priest he trusts to hear his confession, we have suggested priests who understand enough about combat neither to deny that he has anything to feel guilty about or to recoil in revulsion and send him away without the sacrament."[16] What this need for a form of truth-telling beyond the community of combat veterans reveals is that the experience of forgiveness needs another kind of listener, other than the empathetic combat veteran. Although the same ascetical practice, truth-telling to a variety of listeners does different kinds of work on the landscape of one's emotions and desire. The chances are very high that the ascetics of war will lead some to engage in practices resulting in a felt need for forgiveness. Tom

[14] Shay, *Achilles*, xxii.

[15] Shay, *Odysseus*, 180–81, 166–68.

[16] Ibid., 153–54.

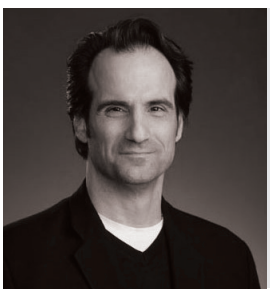
Lance Page/ truthout, flic. kr/p/89iUMF.

[17] "Life After Death."

[18] Ibid., 160.

Mathews' father felt this need, as did John, who could barely speak about how combat in Iraq lead to killing of kids whom he realized "could be your kids."[17] On the cosmic scale, other combat veterans cannot symbolize that forgiveness, cannot be the kind of listener that enables the realization of that forgiveness as an affective event. Someone like a priest is iconically charged to perform that role.

There is an even deeper theological significance to the necessity of truth-telling as part of an ascetics of virtue that undoes the ascetics of war. First, it reveals that God meets someone in the truth of their concrete, historical situation. In the case of combat trauma, it is not a matter of first undoing the effects of war and then going off to the desert to achieve *theosis*; undoing the effects of violence is itself the desert in which the combat veteran finds himself in his struggle to (re)experience the presence of the divine. The ascetical struggle toward divine-human communion is entrenched in a particular history and a particular body, which then demands the virtue of discernment on the part of the community of combat veterans, the mental professional, the priest, and even family and friends, in order to extricate the combat veteran from the grip of the demonic. As Shay argues, "Modern combat is a condition of enslavement and torture."[18] The formation of communities of virtue, which presuppose truth-telling, mitigates and breaks the cycle of violence. Furthermore, neither sin that we commit nor sin committed against us can be forgotten, repressed, or denied. It is part of the fabric of the universe that the truth must be recognized, or it will haunt us in other forms. It is only by integrating the truth of sin into our narrative that it can then be neutralized in its effect. In the end, God is the God of truth, which includes the unique and particular truths of our narratives. God is therefore to be found in the verbal recognition of the truths of our narrative, no matter how horrific those truths may be. ✠



Aristotle Papanikolaou is a professor of theology and the Archbishop Demetrios Chair in Orthodox Theology and Culture at Fordham University. He is co-director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham and a senior fellow at the Emory University Center for the Study of Law and Religion. He is the author and editor of numerous books, among them *Orthodox Constructions of the West*, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*, and *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion.*