Orthodoxy and Conflict

Alexander Patico

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
—William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Is it just me, or has 2017 been a year with an appalling amount of conflict? Polarized politics, rampant urban violence, pitiless terrorism, horribly destructive civil wars: while it is true that crime statistics and historical analyses show that our times are really no more conflictual than previous eras, life certainly *feels* tense, tenuous, and tendentious. The Peace of Christ can seem like a distant dream.

If, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote, the line between good and evil "runs straight through every human heart," then our very nature manifests conflict. David Brooks has reflected on the subject of character in a similar vein:

> Deep inside we are dual in our nature. We are fallen, but also splendidly endowed. We have a side to our nature that is sinful—selfish, deceiving, and self-deceiving—but we have another side to our nature that is in God's image, that seeks transcendence and virtue.[1]

[1] David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

Our task is somehow to repent and transform—to become perfect as God is perfect. How can our faith guide us through this "valley of the shadow of death" and enable theosis?

Conflict has many faces, but its ultimate resolution has only one. In order to find it, believers must distinguish between *ideology* and *theology*. The former involves subscribing to a *Weltanschauung* or worldview, the acceptance of certain principles and priorities: hence libertarianism emphasizes individual human freedom, socialism focuses on collectivities, conservatism values tradition, and progressivism embraces change. Theology, by contrast, is chiefly concerned with the nature of God. How can that singular concept guide a person through a "Slough of Despond" such as the one in which we find ourselves today?

The World and the Kingdom

In *Edible Forest Gardens*, a guide to the ancient practice of forest-based agriculture, David Jacke and Eric Toensmeier write the following:

> The history of Western civilization is the story of our increasing knowledge, and our application of that knowledge to meet the needs originally met with ease in the Garden of Eden. Meanwhile the natural world became "other," objectified, simply a means to an end, a tool or resource for us to meet our goals, an object with no intrinsic value of its own. We now find our knowledge

Christian soldiers, Ravenna, 480–500

> leading us back to an understanding of unity, and of sacredness.[2]

Likewise, Masanobu Fukuoka, another writer on natural farming, notes humans' impulse to "control nature using human will." "Nature," he writes, "is seen as the 'outside world' in opposition to humanity." Fukuoka laments, "if someone does not know his mother, he is a child who does not know whose child he is."[3]

While we should not advocate an anti-scientific approach, a core tenet of Orthodoxy is that God is "everywhere and fills all things." The world as apprehended by human wonder and understood by science has its ground of being in the Almighty, who exists before time, during the tenure of this universe, and "unto ages of ages." Therefore, we may speak of the "in-breaking" of the eschaton on our visible, tangible world, but this metaphor ought not to connote an actual ontological separation of this earthly existence from God's kingdom, except in an epistemological sense: *we* are not always *aware of the Eternal, the Divine*. As Elder Joseph the Hesychast writes in his seventy-eighth Letter:

> God is everywhere. There is no place God is not. . . . You cry out to him, "Where are you, my God?" And he answers, "I am present, my child! I am always beside you." Both inside and outside, above and below, wherever you turn, everything shouts, "God!" In him we live and move. We breathe God, we eat God, we clothe ourselves with God.

The Nation and *Hē Koinonia*

As much as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke and wrote about the "promissory note" issued by America to humanity and the shortfall in its realization, his vision of the United States of America was not synonymous with the "Beloved Community" to whose realization he devoted so much thought and effort. It is important to distinguish between a political community and a Christian communion. When we speak of *koinonia*, we do not mean any particular nation-state or ethnic tribe. In Christ, there is "neither Jew nor Greek." Rather, community, sharing, and peace are what characterize the life of his vision, as anticipated in Micah 4:4: "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid." The members of such a community are mutually accountable: "Those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in com-

[2] Dave Jacke and Eric Toensmeier, *Edible Forest Gardens, vol. 1: Ecological Vision and Theory for Temperate Climate Permaculture* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green, 2005), 52.

[3] Masanobu Fukuoka, *Sowing Seeds in the Desert: Natural Farming, Global Restoration, and Ultimate Food Security* (White River Junction, VT.: Chelsea Green, 2012), 11.

mon" (Acts 4:32). And not only that; it is a communion of souls that exhibits caring for each person's spiritual journey, as Paul wrote to his flock in Colossae: "We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9).

As Orthodox Christians, we must be ever mindful of the essentially problematic nature of patriotism, because we are citizens "not of this world." Church fathers and hierarchs have differed on the role of the Christian citizen of a secular state. No state yet has satisfied all the requirements of a heavenly kingdom, and we should not expect it to. This inevitably leads to tensions for the Christian in their role as citizen. Fr. John A. McGuckin notes how this tension is manifested in St. Basil the Great's reflections on warfare, as Basil endeavors "to sustain an eschatological balance: that war is not part of the Kingdom of God (signified in the Eucharistic ritual as arriving in the present) but is part of the bloody and greed-driven reality of world affairs which is the 'Kingdom-Not-Arrived.'"[4]

[4] John A. McGuckin, "Non-Violence and Peace Traditions in Early and Eastern Christianity," in *Religion, Terrorism and Globalization: Non-Violence—A New Agenda*, ed. K. K. Kuriakose (New York: Nova Science Press, 2006), 189–202.

Others and Neighbors

In part because the Kingdom has not yet arrived, we divide ourselves into "us" and "them" dichotomies: American versus foreigner, Christian versus Muslim, conservative versus liberal, and on and on. Such divisions seem out of step with a Christian understanding of self. For example, in the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus emphasizes *relationship* over *identity*: My neighbor is that person who recognizes my humanity—the person in whom I can perceive the divine light shining forth.

When a Christian thinks of "the people," they should not have an image of faceless numbers of human beings, but of fellow-wayfarers on a journey of reconciliation. Statistics give us impersonal analyses, whereas caring yields a series of precious individuals and deeply reciprocal relationships. Rabbi Arthur Waskow comments on Matthew 22, the passage in which Jesus was asked about the position of the emperor and called for a *denarius*, which bore the image of the Roman ruler. "'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'" Waskow points out that coins—representing those things that belong to the secular authority—are stamped out so that each is absolutely identical. We humans—*we who belong to God*—are, on the other hand, each *different*. As such, if we wish to be in relationship with our fellow human beings, we must approach each as an individual.

Dichotomy and Trinity

Certainly, binary thinking did not begin with Aristotle. But twenty-three centuries after him, our thinking (particularly in the West) is still often captive to his basic approach to the world. Is a statement true or is it false? Are you with us or against us? East Asian philosophy seems a bit more comfortable with the integrated complementarity of *yin* and *yang*. In an essay called "The Japanese Word, *Mu*" Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, writes:

> Yes and no . . . this or that . . . one or zero. In the basis of this elementary two-term discrimination, all human knowledge is built up. The demon-

> stration of this is the computer memory that stores all knowledge in the form of binary information. It contains ones and zeroes, that's all.
>
> Because we're unaccustomed to it, we don't usually see that there's a third possible logical term equal to yes and no which is capable of our understanding in an unrecognized direction. We don't even have a term for it, so I'll have to use the Japanese mu.
>
> Mu means "no thing." Like "quality" it points outside the process of dualistic discrimination. Mu simply says, "no class: not one, not zero, not yes, not no." It states that the context of the question is such that a yes and a no answer is in error and should not be given. "Unask the question" is what it says.
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> Mu becomes appropriate when the context of the question becomes too small for the truth of the answer. When the Zen monk was asked whether a dog had Buddha nature he said "Mu," meaning that if he answered either way he was answering incorrectly. The Buddha nature cannot be captured by yes-or-no questions.[5]

Christ, too, stood outside the easy binaries of first-century Palestine and challenged the conventional wisdom of his time: How could a Jew not fight the Romans? How could the poor-in-spirit be blessed? How could the last be first? Our Orthodox conception of the divine, an unceasing flow of love among three persons, one in essence, is profoundly opposed to the "othering" mentioned above. The Holy Trinity is—to use a very modern formulation—more about kissing than dissing. This is why we exchange a kiss of peace as part of our Divine Liturgy, and why we are warned against judging our fellows.

Paul the Apostle wrote, "For he is our peace, who has made us both [Jew and Gentile] one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. . . He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Eph. 2:14–17). He also wrote, "Never avenge yourselves . . . If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink" (Rom. 12:19–20). Likewise, Mathetes wrote, in the second century, "They [the Christians] love all men, and they are persecuted by all. . . . They are put to death, and yet they are endowed with life. . . . They are in want of all things, and yet they abound in all things. They are dishonored, and yet they are glorified in their dishonor. They are evil spoken of, and yet they are vindicated. They are reviled, and they bless; they are insulted, and they respect. Doing good, they are punished as evil-doers; being punished, they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life."[6]

What does this mean, then, for Christians' participation in war? The answer to this question, at least to some, has seemed clear. A just man should not "engage in warfare," wrote Lactantius, who was the tutor of Crispus, the son of St. Constantine the Great:

> What are the interests of our country, but the inconveniences of another state or nation?—that is, to extend the boundaries which are violently taken from others, to increase the power of the state. . . . for, in the first place, the union of human society is taken away, innocence is taken away, the abstaining from the property of another is taken away; lastly, justice itself is taken away, which is unable to bear the tearing asunder of the human race, and wherever arms have glittered, must be banished and exterminated from thence. . . . How can a man be just

[5] Robert Pirsig, "The Japanese Word, *Mu*," Awakin.org, October 20, 2008, www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=583.

[6] *Epistle to Diognetus*, trans. J. R. Harmer, in J.B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer (eds.), *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: MacMillan, 1898), 506.

who injures, hates, despoils and puts to death? Yet they who strive to be serviceable to their country do all these things.[7]

[7] Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*,(Trans. William Fletcher), in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 7 (New York: Scribner, 1905), 169, 187.

Similarly, in the last century, St. Elizabeth the New Martyr said, "It is easier for a feeble straw to resist a mighty fire than for the nature of sin to resist the power of love. We must cultivate this love in our souls, that we may take our place with all the saints, for they were all-pleasing unto God through their love for their neighbor."

Could we put such radical guidance into practice? Could we choose leaders without regard to party or ideology? Could we extend a helping hand to all who are hungry, and take in all who are homeless? Could we offer to feed the members of ISIS, and wash their feet? In short, could we rely on love to solve our myriad problems? Conflict must always be viewed through the lens of self-emptying compassion, rather than self-protecting caution.

A Starting Point

As noted above, the line between good and evil can be found just inches away from the fingers that type these words. I—and you, the reader—must start with introspection and the Holy Mystery of Penance, leading to *metanoia*. In Classical Greek, *metanoia* meant changing one's mind about someone or something. When personified, Metanoia was depicted as a shadowy goddess, cloaked and sorrowful, who accompanied Kairos, the god of opportunity, sowing regret and inspiring repentance for the "missed moment." In Christian theology, the term has taken on a somewhat different meaning. Rather than mere regret, repentance allows us to take a different path going forward, to transform ourselves by looking in a different

Ukrainian priests between pro-government forces and protesters, Kiev, Maidan, January 2014.

direction: toward the light which is Christ. For example, the nineteenth-century Russian spiritual classic *The Way of a Pilgrim* is almost entirely concerned with consciously—using the Jesus Prayer—redirecting one's mental and spiritual activity toward humility and holiness.

As we proceed with interior "housekeeping," we inevitably, by the grace of God, become aware of the kinship we have with *all* other children of God. The great Orthodox monastic tradition, which has given rise to the collected wisdom of the fathers and mothers of the Church, has this as a fundamental element: hearing the cries of all humanity, co-suffering with nameless souls, and living one's life with the eschaton in mind. Conflict is a constant challenge, but it can be overcome when love is the rule.

As a result of such individual spiritual labor, God willing, we can reinvigorate efforts to redirect the wider Body of Christ toward Christ.

The Holy Orthodox Church ought to serve as a template of embodied grace. As determined by the Council of Constantinople in 1872, there is no place in God's Church for ethnophyletism, which leads groups of Christians to distinguish and divorce themselves from other such groups, and leads to prejudice, enmity, and even war. How can the flock that was tended by St. Peter be excluded from the fold tended by St. Mark, or the churches established by St. Paul in the West be estranged from those founded by St. Thomas in the East? How can the Church in the Holy City, which was established by St. James, be allowed to lie in fragments?

There can also be no doubt about our responsibility for those who stand outside the Church, especially those who are oppressed or marginalized by society at large. Let us recall Christ's words in Matthew 25 about "the least of these my brothers and sisters." We have recently seen the impressive example of the residents of the Greek island of Lesbos, where the human flotsam of displaced Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghanis—as many as 30,000 per month, a number equal to the permanent population of the island's capital—found shelter and solace. Thousands of Christians are now saying, symbolically, "We are Muslims, too!" in answer to anti-Muslim measures taken by governments in the West. International Orthodox Christian Charities directs its relief efforts not based on the identities of the suffering, but on their suffering and what is needed for its alleviation.

Each political narrative—Israeli security concerns or Palestinian oppression, Syrian sovereignty or human rights, capitalist markets or socialist solidarity—must be held warily, but gently, by the Orthodox Christian. All those who espouse them had their origin in the same God, who knew their names before they were born. Each is precious to someone . . . if only to our Father.

The above offers no easy formula for Christian witness in a conflicted world. It merely points to some principles: God is our Lord; God is love; therefore, love is the way. Conflict will occur until our eternal life begins, but this conflict need not be seen as a permanent state or an all-powerful force. We live our faith when we deny dichotomy, reach across dividing lines, and build bridges of caring and service. We will be vindicated and rewarded when we encounter our Lord face to face at the end of days.

"Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace. Teach me to treat all that come to me with peace of soul and with firm conviction that your will governs all. . . . Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering or embarrassing others. . . . Direct my will, teach me to pray, pray yourself in me. Amen." ❋

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