

God and Man, Part One

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Saint Sophrony, a disciple and spiritual son of Saint Silouan of Athos, is considered one of the most important theologians of the Orthodox Church in the twentieth century. Following a lecture and discussion at the University of Oxford, the moderator asked the audience: Is there a final question? One of the attendees asked Saint Sophrony: "Who is God?" He answered, "Tell me first: Who is man?"

The connection between God and man is, in fact, much deeper than one might imagine. God is not sitting far away in His heaven, watching man and what he does, like someone watching a movie on television. When God created man, He created, at the core of his being, an essential connection with him. There is nothing more evident than the constant longing for absolute fullness that transcends all limits, and ignorance of it often causes a person's constant tension and anxiety. Thinkers ponder: Why does the mortal human being, who exists in a world where everything is fleeting, possess this unlimited longing and this dream of immortality? They consider this human aspiration towards absoluteness and perfection, in a limited and corrupt world, a sign of the existence of the Supreme Absolute, that is, God.

Imprinted on man is the continuous aspiration for perfection with his Creator, because he is the only creature imprinted in the image of his God. Thus, you find man inherently drawn to horizons that are endless, across all fields. You see him searching and striving, tirelessly, toward completion, perfection, and infinity. The wonderful saying of the blessed Augustine rings true in it: "You created us to turn to Thee, O Lord, and our hearts will not find rest unless they rest in Thee."

How could this not be, when God created man differently than the rest of creation. The Bible says that later came into being by a word from God: "Let it be thus," and it happened... "And God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1). This is how all other living and inanimate creatures came into being. As for man, God said: "Let us make man in our image and after our likeness," and then He took dust from the earth, formed it, and breathed into it the breath of life, and Adam was made. Of course, this is a theological depiction of creation. The Divine Revelation wants to say through him the following:

- Man was created in the image of God, that is, there is something special in him, a breath of God, and this is the meaning of “breathed into him.”
- He is called to attain the divine ideal by developing the image of God that is in him. He is called to become, by divine grace, a “little god,” in the words of some of the Holy Fathers of the Church.
- In the eyes of God, he is the most important creature among all creation. The Biblical narrative speaks about God working with His hands to create man. By this, he is above all creatures. (However, Biblical revelation tells us that God is spirit, and therefore, He has no hands or bodies like us.)
- Also, God’s call to Adam to name the animals means that God crowned him king over creation. In this, he has a role and a responsibility.

Hence, in Orthodox theology, man is a being in two worlds: the heavenly and the earthly. His perfect and most complete example is the second hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, who in his person combined divinity and humanity.

Thus, man has become – through Jesus Christ and His divine grace – capable of attaining God’s likeness and experiencing the uncreated Divine Light.

Therefore, we find in Christianity, and in Orthodoxy in particular, much discussion and many living examples about those who have attained a pure and holy life, qualifying them to receive the light of the uncreated God, and subsequently experience the state of theosis (deification).

Are we surprised that philosophical movements that have “killed” God and declared atheism as their approach have returned to “crush” man? The “death of God,” is inevitably followed by the death of man. For what value does man have that distinguishes him from other beings, if he loses his connection to God and loses his inherent uniqueness in the divine image? He becomes just a number, with no unique personality, no feelings, and no special entity. He becomes just a talking animal.

God and Man, Part Two

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Humans have created intellectual and religious movements that have depicted different images of God. However, if we closely examine any of their views of the human being, we can easily then understand their views of God. When the image of the human being is distorted and his unique personality is negated, and he is not considered a unique being with a divine breath deserving respect, then the image of God will inevitably be distorted. If, for example, you do not respect human freedom, how can you believe that God respects freedom (even if man often denies God and fights Him in the name of this freedom)? As Tagore said: "I love you, O God, because you have given me the freedom to deny you."

These reflections lead me to highlight the great responsibility that believers bear regarding their role in manifesting the image of God, lest they distort it. How many people have loved God because they saw believers manifesting, in their elevated behavior and conduct, a bright image of a loving God, to an indescribable degree? How much of the opposite is true? An atheist once said to me: "If I were sure that God is as you tell me, I would become one of the first to believe in Him, and I would devote my life to telling others about Him." Unfortunately, he could not be freed from a distorted image of God engraved in his mind since his childhood.

The renowned theologian, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, considers that entering into the mystery of man and defining his unique personality is the first task of Christian theology, in general, and Orthodox theology, in particular, in the twenty-first century. The Church Fathers called it a "small universe," "a large universe," and a "mystery," but delving deeper, a "eucharistic being." Emphasizing these dimensions can provide basic answers to our contemporary world in crisis.

The word Eucharist is derived from the Greek which means thanksgiving. In the Divine Liturgy, the world is re-presented to God, not through God's natural gifts of wheat and grapes, but after man turns them into bread and wine.

Man is the priest of God in this world, and his main role lies in tending creation and presenting it, with thanks, to the Creator. Isn't this what we chant, in every Divine Liturgy: "Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, in behalf of all (in some translations, in all ways), and for all?"

Humanity has known various images of God. Different spiritual, religious, and philosophical movements in the world often depicted the image of God based on the image of man, which resulted in a faded, deficient and distorted image of God because the starting point was the creature and not the creator.

Christianity did the opposite. God revealed Himself to humans so they could know their value to Him and their role in creation. Movement in Christianity is from top to bottom, from heaven to earth. It is a divine providence, not a human endeavor. This forms, in Orthodox Christianity, man's quest to constantly rise to the level that befits him as a creature with the breath of God in him.