

What it means to be human religion essay



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[1st]First of all, I would like to emphasize the theological and academic depth of Dr Mark Elliott’s paper. I would also like to acknowledge the initiative of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey (especially of its director, Professor Fr Ioan Sauca) in organizing this dialogue between Evangelicals and Orthodox which enables members of each tradition from different national contexts to meet and explore areas of convergence on major Christian themes. Such discussion between the two different traditions might bring to light common points of doctrine and bring them closer to one another. The Orthodox need to draw nearer to the Evangelicals, and the Evangelicals need to see the Orthodox world with more confidence. The time has already come for us to be no longer divided.

[bod]The theme of this year’s seminar, “ What it means to be Human”, will enable Orthodox and Evangelicals to explore, compare and contrast their understandings of what it means to be human (theological anthropology), and to reflect on how the extent of convergence in this area might bring us closer together theologically and facilitate our joint practical action.

[hed]Convergence and Divergence

[hed1]1. The four distinctive characteristics

[1st]In the first part of his paper, Dr Elliott outlines present day Evangelicalism both from a historical and a doctrinal perspective. I have noted the four distinctive characteristics of Evangelicalism – those of conversionism, Biblicism, crucicentrism and activism, to which the Evangelical Alliance has added that of Christocentrism, “ for [as Dr Elliott

says] it is hard to imagine any Christian movement or denomination that would not call itself Christocentric”.

[bod]The first four characteristics are also found in the Orthodox doctrinal framework in a more or less nuanced form. However, the Orthodox might have some problems with the fifth element – Christocentrism – in the sense in which the author has mentioned it. The author writes, “ I I think Evangelicals do have a particular way of understanding the incarnation as being less about the assumption of ‘ humanity’ than as the activity of the God-man individual, who is more a substitute than a representative.”

For the Orthodox, Jesus Christ, through his incarnation, has assumed our humanity in his divine hypostasis. In Jesus Christ our human nature has received its real existence, not as being its own centre but in a pre-existent centre, namely in the unity of the divine hypostasis of the Logos. Through his incarnation the hypostasis of the divine Logos did not unite with another human hypostasis; rather, he assumed human nature in his eternal divine hypostasis, becoming, by means of this event, the hypostasis of our own human nature. Hence, through his incarnation, Jesus Christ as Son of God became united in a supreme manner with our humanity. In other words, he came into the closest possible proximity with us. This process is a consequence of the “ hypostatic union”. That is why he is called God-Man.

[bod]From this point of view, our humanity has been healed from all the effects and consequences of the original sin by Jesus’s sacrifice and resurrection. It is important to emphasize in this context that the sacrifice of Jesus was directed not only towards his Father but also towards his own

human nature and, implicitly, towards us human beings. Through his sacrifice offered to God, Jesus Christ is made perfect as a human being, sanctifying or perfecting other human beings through this. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes clearly on this matter: “ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb. 5: 9). Or “ For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (Heb. 9: 13-14). The same author says further: “ it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all ... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb. 10: 10, 14). Christ has become through his cross and resurrection the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15: 20). Therefore, he is not a substitute for humankind, but the one who fully assumed and fulfilled it. From this perspective, we as human beings do not remain external to the incarnation, but are truly present in it.

[hed1]2. Atonement: one of the three issues in Evangelical theological anthropology

[1st]For the Orthodox, Christ’s sacrifice and his death on the cross are not understood as “ penal substitutionary atonement”. From this point of view, statements like “ sin ‘ incurs divine wrath and judgment’â€...” and “ on the cross, Jesus sacrificially atoned for sin by ‘ dying in our place’ and ‘ paying the price’ of such sin” are problematic for our soteriological doctrine.

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The Orthodox understand Jesus's death on the cross as being more a healing of the human nature disfigured by sin, and not as a price that Jesus had to pay in our place in order to satisfy God, whose honour is offended by our sin. In view of the fact that we have been created as an overflow of God's love, our sin has caused him more sadness than offence. The concept of a substitutionary sacrifice by means of which the offended honour of God was re-established, has more to do with a so-called juridical act (sin-punishment-redemption) than with one which would express the divine love or sympathy. In this respect, the Orthodox might also have a problem with the concept of inherited guilt. Although Paul seems to be quite clear in this respect – “ Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned” (Rom. 5: 12) – I think this may cause difficulties for the Orthodox. In my own opinion, Paul is talking in this context about the consequences of sin rather than inherited guilt resulting from Adam's sin.

According to the theology of the church fathers, we consider the cross as the way to resurrection. From this point of view, Orthodox theology is more resurrectional than Evangelicalism, although this does not mean that the Orthodox put less emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ than on his resurrection. In Orthodox worship, the veneration of the cross is not separated from the praise of the resurrection. This is wonderfully illustrated in a liturgical hymn: “ We worship your Cross, Jesus Christ, and your holy Resurrection we praise and honour”.

When considering the difference between a Calvinian and a Grotian understanding of the cross, the Orthodox may ask, are the Evangelicals more

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Calvinian or Grotian? Dr Elliott points out that Calvin sees God as being pleased because his Son as man obeyed him. For Grotius, God is above any such sense of being offended. The anthropological premise is that humans are taken seriously by God, but what does this mean? From this point of view, the Orthodox are closer to the doctrinal position of Grotius than to that of Calvin. My question is further justified by the following point made by Dr Elliott:

To be honest, those who espouse a view that God the Father did not send his Son to the cross with a view to his bearing a penalty are arguably those who see the cross as one doctrine among others, and perhaps are not crucicentric enough to be traditionally Evangelical.

[hed1]3. “ The Authority and Power of the Bible” and “ The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ” – two theological issues highlighted by the Lausanne Covenant, 1974

[1st]The concept of mission, based on the authority and power of the Bible and the uniqueness and universality of Christ, may be a point of convergence between the two traditions. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for the Orthodox to put more emphasis on the liturgical reading of the Bible than on the teaching and preaching of it. As Professor John Breck has said, [shortquote]... however important the place of the Bible may be in both personal and liturgical usage, for many Orthodox that place is purely formal. They respect and venerate the Scriptures, they recognize many familiar passages, particularly from the Sunday Gospel readings, and they insist that theirs is a “ biblical Church.” Nevertheless, only a small minority seeks daily

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nourishment from Bible reading. ... we Orthodox have all too often neglected or even abandoned our patristic heritage which placed primary emphasis on the preaching of God's Word.

[1st]In this sense, the frequently made comment that “ the Orthodox kiss the Bible and don't read it” is not entirely unjustified.

[hed1]4. The true image of God

[1st]The idea that human beings are created by and in Christ – as the true image of God (Heb. 1: 1-4) – with the hope of a blessed and immortal life is a point of convergence between our traditions. Yet church fathers do not speak only of the image of God, but also and to an equal extent of the resemblance (likeness) to God. In this sense St John of Damascus says, “ the phrase ‘ according to the image’ means the ‘ reason’ and ‘ freedom’, whereas ‘ according to the resemblance’ means ‘ likeness’â€¦”. He continues, “ the image is developed into likeness through the practice of virtues”. Therefore, the image of God is something which is given to us and the resemblance is something that we have to achieve. It is only in this sense that we might accept what Paul Evdokimov said: “ An image without resemblance is one reduced to passivity.” But even in a passive state, the realization that we are made in the image of God remains – eikona tou Theou. This reality is beautifully expressed in the words of the Orthodox funeral service: “ I am the image of your ineffable glory, though I bear the marks of my transgressions.”

[bod]Since the man is created not only from dust but also through God's breath of life it becomes obvious that he has a special relationship with the nature from which he is formed, and also with God his Creator. As St Gregory

of Nazianzus affirms, “ Since from dust I have been created, I belong to the earthly life; but being also a small divine part, I also carry in my life the desire for eternal life.”

Therefore, because he is made in the image of God, man is rooted and anchored in eternity. But being the image of God refers not only to the soul but also to the body. St Gregory Palamas sees the “ image” as relating to the whole human being: “ The name ‘ man’ does not refer to the soul or the body in a separate way, but to both at the same time because they were created together according to the image of God.”

[hed1]5. The weakness of the will and the grace of God

[1st]We as Orthodox fully agree that after Adam’s sin, human will remained very weak. But in spite of this fact, human beings still have the freedom to choose for God. This was specially emphasized by the Patriarch Jeremias during a dialogue with the Lutherans around 1580, as Dr Elliott comments: “ humans preserved the ability to choose for God – freedom as the possibility of choice”. According to the Orthodox perspective, grace does not force or limit the human will and its freedom. That is, grace does not work in or for human beings in an irresistible way, forcing them to receive grace in order to be saved without their collaboration. The reason why not all human beings are saved is not because this is predestined by God, with some people being saved and others being lost, but, rather, because of a lack of response by some people to grace. The grace of God does not force anyone to pursue actions independently of their will. That is why the Orthodox refuse to accept the concept of absolute predestination.

Nowadays, we hear more and more voices among Orthodox in favour of a relative predestination, in the sense that God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2: 4). This relative predestination is shown in God's will for every human being to be saved. This understanding of predestination sees it as conditioned by God's foreknowledge of people's collaboration or otherwise with divine grace: "those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8: 29). If God predestined the salvation of only some human beings, that would contradict his eternal love as manifested in the incarnation and the cross of his Son, and also the ontological-universal value of the Christ's sacrifice on the cross. From this point of view, Elliott's comment that for the sixteenth-century Lutherans in dialogue "the point of salvation was to have one's independent centre of decision-making removed, to be replaced with total dependence on God" sounds quite strange to the Orthodox.

6. Sanctification and justification

Are we wholly sanctified when we are justified? And when does this process happen? At conversion or at baptism? From Dr Elliott's paper we may conclude that there is a lack of consensus among the Evangelicals in this respect. Is human sinful nature totally destroyed? Are the roots of pride, self-will, anger and love of the world totally removed from the heart, as John Wesley claimed? These are questions that need to be addressed.

From an Orthodox perspective, conversion is the simple act of affirmation of a decision with regard to justification. The process of becoming

holy begins with the sacrament of baptism. However, the fulfilment of holiness is obtained only at the end of a constant battle with sin and the continual practice of virtue. From this point of view, the Orthodox see two stages towards true holiness: sacramental holiness, obtained temporarily through baptism, and moral holiness, understood as a final stage to be reached. In this final stage, holiness corresponds to a stage which in patristic tradition and spirituality is called theosis. We will return to this issue again at the end of this paper.

The Orthodox perspective on the sinful nature of human beings affirms that after the fall, the image of God was not totally lost and human knowledge was not entirely reduced to a dark and opaque understanding of the world. Human beings can partially penetrate this opacity by means of another way of knowing, namely that which arises from virtue. The marring of the image of God (darkening of reason, corruption of the heart, weakening of the will) in human beings does not mean its destruction or abolition, for none of the human spiritual functions were completely destroyed through original sin. Original sin has only obscured the image of God in human beings, not destroyed it. The tendency and the capacity of human beings to know and to want to do what is good have also survived the fall, but obviously in a weakened state. Fallen human beings are also able to achieve virtue and overcome temptation – “ if you do what is right” (cf. Gen. 4: 7); fallen human beings can reject death, choosing life – “ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity ... Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30: 15, 19). Therefore Orthodox do not see

human beings as totally fallen, nor the image of God in humanity as totally destroyed.

[hed1]7. The anthropology of revivalism

[1st]I do not know to what extent Evangelicals accept the ideas of Charles Finney, presented in Dr Elliott's paper and summarized below. But some of these could, with certain qualifications, be shared by the Orthodox. For instance:

[list]- " Preach the reality of hell, not of sin".

- " Being filled by the Spirit is vital since, in the spiritual battle, attack is the best form of defence."

- " One must give the heart to God and submit to him."

- " Repentance is a change of mind, as regards God and towards sin. It is not only a change of view, but a change of the ultimate preference or choice of the soul. It is a voluntary change and by consequence involves a change of feeling and of action toward God and toward sin." These words may be accepted by the Orthodox as being a clear definition of the meaning of repentance.

- " Humans have responsibility to repent and believers should not pray that God would help them to do that, for the sinner has to provide the will and disposition." However, these words leave no space for synergism, understood as cooperation between God and human beings concerning the process of their renewal.

[1st]The Pauline statement in 2 Corinthians 4: 16 is very important in relation to the process of human renewal. “ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is perishing, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” According to the Orthodox, our salvation includes:

[list]a passage from death to life, from darkness to light (John 3: 1-6; Col. 1: 13-14), through repentance, faith and baptism – “ I have been saved.”

a process of spiritual growth and maturation (2 Pet. 1: 2-8) through ongoing repentance, faith and communion, often called deification – “ I am being saved.” Paul writes of our inner life being renewed day by day.

a promise of eternal life (2 Cor. 5: 9-11; John 14: 1-6), calling us to perseverance and righteousness – “ I shall be saved.”

[hed1]8. The relation between soul and body

[1st]What is the soul? Answers such as “ the body is the image of God by association with the soul” and “ soul and body are aspects of the human existence”, quoted by Dr Elliott, may be seen as convergence points between the anthropologies of our two traditions. Therefore, the human being’s uniqueness consists in the close relation between spirit and soma.

Salvation is for the whole human being – soma and soul. Similarly, the final act of universal judgment applies to the whole human being. Our anthropology is therefore understood only through the eschatological event. That is why the body will be raised again in order to be judged by the Creator, together with the soul with which it has formed a unity during its

earthly life. From this point of view, the death of the body does not mean its destruction, but the passageway towards a new existence.

In view of the fact that Paul says “ your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3: 3), we may conclude that our humanity is a great mystery. Some of the Evangelicals appear to disagree with this.

9. Deification (Theosis)

Dr Elliott argues that Evangelicals may have problems with deification. Why should this be so? If we understand deification in the sense in which R. J. Bauckham and other theologians apparently did, as quoted in the paper, namely that “ humans become divine as God is divine”, such a thought is obviously unthinkable for any Christian theologian, Evangelical or Orthodox. From an Orthodox point of view, deification is more than being in the image of God or being adopted as God’s children. Being renewed by God’s grace, we become partakers of the divine nature: “ Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1: 4). This does not mean that we become divine by nature. If we participated in God’s essence or nature, the distinction between God and humans would be abolished. What this means is that we participate in God’s divine grace, described in scripture in a number of ways, such as glory, love, virtue and power. We are to become like God by his grace, and truly his adopted children, but we never become God by nature. For we are human, always have been human, and always will be human. We cannot take on the nature of God.

Divinization, in the definitive form which the fathers gave it, looks towards a single goal. That is the goal of assuring man that the quest for the authentic person (not as a “ mask” or as a “ tragic figure”) is not mythical or nostalgic but a historical reality. Jesus Christ does not justify the title of Saviour because he brings the world a sublimely beautiful revelation of personhood, but because he realizes in history the very reality of the person and makes it the basis and “ hypostasis” of the person for every man. According to some church fathers, this transformation occurs especially through the eucharist, for when Christ’s body and blood become one with ours, we become Christ-bearers and partakers of the divine nature.

St John of Damascus, writing in the eighth century, makes a remarkable observation. The word “ God” in the scriptures refers not to the divine nature or essence, for that is unknowable. “ God” refers rather to the divine energies – the power and grace of God which we can perceive in this world. The Greek word for God, Theos, comes from a verb meaning “ to run”, “ to see” or “ to burn”. These are energy words, not essence words.

In John 10: 34 Jesus, quoting Psalm 82: 6, repeats the statement, “ You are gods.” The fact that he was speaking to a group of religious leaders who were accusing him of blasphemy allows, in my opinion, for the following interpretation: Jesus is not using the term “ god” to refer to the divine nature. We are gods in that we bear his image, not his nature.

Deification means that we are to become more like God through his grace, that is through his divine energies. The process of our being renewed in God’s image and likeness (Gen. 1: 26) began when the Son of God assumed

our humanity in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary. Thus, those who are joined with Christ through faith in holy baptism enter into a re-creation process, being renewed in God's image and likeness.

Based on the earlier Council of Chalcedon, as well as on the theology of Saint Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662), Palamas strenuously defended the church's teaching that a direct, personal experience of God himself (theosis) was accessible through God's energies made available through the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ. The incarnate Word hypostasized human nature and acted in accordance with the divine and human wills. There was thus a sharing of attributes (communication idiomatum) whereby the humanity of Christ was penetrated by the divine energies and thereby deified. Those divine energies, which we partake of, were not understood as an impersonal "something" from God but as God himself because Christ is consubstantial (homoousios) with the Father. Through the incarnate Christ, God gives himself to us in such a living, personal way that the gift and the giver are one and the same.

Historically, deification has often been illustrated by the "sword and fire" metaphor. A steel sword is thrust into a hot fire until the sword takes on a red glow. The energy of the fire penetrates the sword. The sword never becomes fire, but it picks up the properties of fire. By application, the divine energies penetrate the human nature of Christ. Being joined to Christ, our humanity is interpenetrated with the energies of God through Christ's glorified flesh. Nourished by the body and blood of Christ, we partake of the grace of God – his strength, his righteousness, his love – and are enabled to serve him and glorify him. Thus we, being human, are being deified.

Theosis means the transformation of being into true personhood in the person of Christ. The conclusion is that the ontology of personhood and communion which emerges from the understanding of the eucharist as a communion event in the body of Christ forms the basis for the understanding of the God-world relation, and more importantly, the patristic notion of energies. In this context, we can see that theosis is trinitarian through unity in the hypostasis of Christ.

Theosis is, therefore, the ultimate goal toward which all people should strive, “ the blessed telos for which all things were made”. It describes the “ ineffable descent of God to the ultimate limit of our fallen human condition, even unto death – a descent of God which opens to men a path of ascent, the unlimited vistas of the union of created beings with the Divinity”.

Deification is a descriptive term for God’s redemptive activity towards human beings. When human beings respond to this activity, the ultimate transformation of a human being without losing personhood is made possible. It is a process that should be understood in a carefully qualified sense, as an ongoing process, going from one realm of glory to another (2 Cor. 3: 18). Even when the term deification is not explicitly mentioned it is implicitly present “ as the content of the salvation proclaimed by the gospel”.

[hed]Conclusions

[list]In terms of a definition of what it means to be human, we may assert the following: The human being is the image of God and at the same time is called to his resemblance (likeness).

Jesus' incarnation, cross and resurrection do not only make possible the salvation of human beings, but also herald the starting point (beginning) of their deification.

The basis for the deification of human beings is found in Jesus Christ's deified nature. An example of this reality can be found in John 20: 19-20. Here we read of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his ten disciples. He enters the house and stands in their midst although the doors were shut.

The justification and sanctification of human beings are two different processes with three distinct stages:

[list2] I have been saved – started in faith, repentance, baptism and Eucharist;

b. I am being saved – achieved by means of the life in Christ;

c. I shall be saved – continued in the process of deification in eternity.

5. The death of the body does not mean the dissolution of the human being, but it represents the entry into a new existence in God's presence. From this perspective, human beings are immortal.