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Making Sense of Religious Dialogue

Introduction

The possibility for meaningful conversation among religious thinkers, either from person to person or across the boundaries of tradition, is ripe in our day. The possibility for religious conversation depends on a careful rethinking of how conversation occurs, and an openness to the present reality of what I will call religious thinking. As such, an attentive recognition of how these two elements find a meaningful place in human personal and public life is necessary. For although it seems to be widely acknowledged that certain religious traditions have a determining place in our western world, and that dialogue is a means to come to terms with and confront this phenomenon, the horizons of religion and dialogue remain only partially explored, and often when a thinner understanding of the two is offered it is simply taken and accepted.

In what follows, I propose to widen the definitions of religious thinking and of dialogue, and in doing so I hope to open these ideas to renewed, thoughtful interest. To this end, I will present a Gadamerian account of conversation as constitutive of how humans speak meaningfully with one another, before turning to the role that religious thinking plays in our lives. Finally, I will look at certain aspects of Eastern Christian thought as an example of how a religious tradition may be seen to flourish within an understanding of humans as conversational beings for whom meaning is a determining condition.

In the course of the essay, certain questions will arise which I will attempt to address – questions such as the relationship between notions of revelation and conversation, between truth and being, and problematic ideas surrounding the image and meaning of the person at the heart of different religious traditions. However, because of the potential scope of such a questioning enterprise, the positive paradigm I will end with must be understood as an implicit critique of what remains unsaid. I speak of Eastern Christianity not only because it offers a profound and beautiful understanding of human meaning, but also because it is my own tradition – something

not abstract, but an existential reality for me – and if we think and speak seriously, it is a good way to begin.

I.

To speak about the possibility of meaningful conversation in our world is to speak, in part, about the perceived character of modernity. The word ‘modernity’, somewhat in vogue as an attempt at a total or dominant definition, is used in public and intellectual spheres to mean things such as the domination of instrumental reason, subjectivism, or objectivism, the final critique of metaphysics or of religion, the era of the endless deferral of meaning, or of meaning’s being bound up with certain social- or gender- based construction, or with the secularism, fundamentalism, voyeurism, or consumerism prevalent on the pages or screens of the mass media, et cetera; Milan Kundera has even hinted that widespread stupidity may be a defining characteristic of modernity. However, leaving aside all these definitions as partial or misleading truths, I want to go beyond or beneath them, and assert that even as we try to make sense of the character of what we are living now, we are attempting to understand how meaning is passed on and is made for humans, given the conditions and world we inhabit. Broadly speaking, one might say that one of the characteristics of our time now is the critique or refusal of received meanings, and the attempt to come to see how the various idols and realities of our forms of meaning determine to a large extent our thoughtful undertakings. What is not discarded, however, is the human need to understand meaning – our own and others’ – and to see how it fits into our overall experience.

Thus, as I see it, our modern situation is defined by its hermeneutic character. Perhaps more widely than before, we need to understand how we are in and of this time, as well as perceive the various ways in which we creatively transform our time into an image of ourselves and our hopes. In understanding ourselves, we need to understand the other – on the personal or communal level – and we need to understand how our various traditions have brought us to where we are now, how our traditions have shaped the ground we stand on and the future we anticipate. This remains an open question that we must address.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, the brilliant and neglected twentieth century philosopher of hermeneutics and Heidegger’s student, calls the interaction with the ‘other’ – whether the inner dialogue with oneself, one’s past, one’s community, or the other person – conversation. The aim

of conversation, Gadamer says, is understanding. However, two dangers threaten understanding: first, that we will simply agree; and second, that we will simply agree to disagree.¹ Part of the problem with each of these is the assumed final character of the ‘agreement’; the other part of the problem is that implicit understanding of the nature of conversation present. Another way of characterising the twofold danger is that we will either ‘become’ the other or we will ‘relativise’ the other.

The first danger – that we will agree with the other or ‘become’ the other – leaves our own person and judgements behind, and is an attempt to step into the consciousness of the other, or to put it more mildly, an attempt to see how the other person is right – not in terms of their side of the conversation, nor in terms of understanding their utterances as charitably as possible, but absolutely. The difficulty in this is not only the unreality of it – to leave oneself behind in this way is impossible – but also that if one purports to understand the other purely, outside of conversation and context, then all criteria regarding the wisdom or foolishness of the other is set aside, neglected or forgotten.

The second possible danger of understanding is the idea that ‘we will agree to disagree’; this, in its turn, is a recourse to relativism – it is the other relativised. In this way, conversation ends as soon as difficult differences enter: I understand your point of view as a subjective event, but since I disagree, we will leave it at that. Relativism – a false totality – is the framework for such interactions.²

Both of these dangers – becoming the other, and relativising the other – share a certain view of conversation that Gadamer would find problematic. In each case, conversation is seen to end – to finish – when a certain state of affairs is attained. For each case, the state of affairs is something akin to an objective description of where understanding has got to, and what the final picture looks like. In both cases, conversation ends (or can end) when understanding begins. Moreover, understanding is seen to be a one-time thing: one understands, and that is that.

Gadamer understands conversation to be ‘a process of coming to an understanding’ (*Truth and Method*, hereafter *TM*, 385), which he holds to be ongoing; he says that ‘[t]o

¹ Although these characterisations are simplistic admittedly, they indicate certain possibilities in terms of different ends of the spectrum.

² Philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Gadamer, and Donald Davidson have all commented upon the shortsightedness of most claims to relativity – basically put, to understand as different depends on some common ground.

understand what a person says is ... to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences' (*TM*, 383). In other words, if conversation is ongoing and if what is understood is not the other as such but the subject matter of the conversation – what is formed not only out of the inner logic of what is discussed, but also by what is said in the conversation – then the two above-mentioned dangers are avoided: for the conversation will not end (in agreement or otherwise) and there is no effort to 'get into' another person's thought processes or mind-space. For Gadamer, this view of conversation forms the model for all events of knowing and relating.

II.

One might define Gadamer's understanding of conversation as an ongoing event of understanding. Ongoing, because given the openness of the meaningful subject matter and the fact of human finitude, understanding is never final; an event, because what happens in conversation is that a dynamic relating occurs – a triadic event, as it were, in which the two persons forego their own subjectivity and immerse themselves in the subject matter at hand. In the event of conversation and understanding, one must give up trying to be absolutely 'right', and instead be attentively present and speak to what is true about the conversational matter. This implies leaving aside the urge to assert 'one's own point of view', and instead 'being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were' (*TM*, 379). In authentic conversation one transcends one's own preconceptions and expectations in the effort to follow and make sense of the inner logic of the subject matter at hand.

The essence of conversation, for Gadamer, is questioning and answering. It is, true to the overall form of conversation, an ongoing, relational event, in which some subject matter is both built and understood. As to be in conversation requires 'a fundamental sort of openness' (*TM*, 361) to the other and to the subject matter, questioning – the essential act of conversation – means 'to bring into the open' (*TM*, 363). Along with opening, the 'essence of the question is to have sense' (*TM*, 362) – that is, a question opens and sets up the manner in which the subject matter is understood (at that point in the conversation). The answer to the question, which itself has the same open structure of the question, is not a giving forth of information or revealing of fact, but rather a corresponding openness to, dwelling within, and (possible) illumination of the sense given to the subject matter by the first question. In conversation a questioner both

addresses and is addressed. He is addressed insofar as he is tempered, responded to, and limited by the inner logic of the subject matter and the questions from his interlocutor; he addresses insofar as he tries to speak, out of his own thinking and experience, to what is being said.

Each word, each part of the conversational event is co-determined by the other two parts; neither of the persons nor subject matter rules the others. For the subject matter only has sense insofar as it is related by the two persons, and the persons make sense within the context of the conversation only insofar as they attend to the word of the other and the hitherto determined form and direction of the subject matter – what has been said. In other words, in the event of conversation each part has meaning only in terms of the whole, and the whole has meaning only in terms of the parts which belong to it.

It is important to note that Gadamer avoids what is commonly understood as essentialism, or the thing as object. For the subject matter, although given sense and boundaries by how it is said and the way in which it is questioned, has no given essence, no immutable uninterpreted core which lies behind how it is revealed and understood. Rather, it is progressively formed and given sense, while remaining perpetually revisable and open to new or renewed questions. The truth of the subject matter is not essential or assumed; it is given, revised, and enriched as the conversation occurs. Likewise, Gadamer's understanding of man is not essential, *per se*, but relational. Indeed, for Gadamer conversation is not only man's primary activity, but indicates the very structure of human being, leading Gadamer to speak of 'the conversation that we ourselves are' (*TM*, 378). The fundamental fact of man is that he is a conversational being – that is, he gathers meaning from dialogue with himself, the other, and with his tradition. That man as man has relating at the centre of his meaning allows Gadamer to speak of the need for man to be 'able to preserve his orientation toward openness' (*TM*, 367). As the sense of conversation is basic to human meaning, then the essence of the question – to open and to have sense in relation to the other – is at the centre of how humans experience the world. But what does it mean for a 'human' to 'experience' the 'world'? Gadamer's understanding of each of these terms is as important as it is harmonious with the central place he gives to conversation for human meaning.

One might say that Gadamer's understanding of conversation determines his thinking, for he sees the structure of conversation as ongoing questioning and answering inherent in all human meaning. Thus for Gadamer 'experience' has the form of conversation: not a sequence of isolated instances but a continual building of meaning and development of understanding. Thus

also the 'world' for Gadamer arises out of the unity of saying and being, and 'is' insofar as it is 'said' by man. The world is, primarily, the ongoing event of relationships between and in different traditions. Both experience and world, though, arise out of an understanding of what it means to be human.

Man as the questioning being has two other fundamental aspects, for Gadamer: finitude and language. Man's finitude – his discreteness from the past and from the other – is what allows him to be open, to question and have sense, for it is in relating to the past and to the other that man begins to understand how and what he is, and this is accomplished in that something finite can relate to something else, something other than it. The two primary sets of relationships a person has are with, firstly, his own past – what Gadamer calls tradition, which is what provides the ground, the basic matter, for human being in time; and secondly, the other, which is how present meaning, which includes the working out of his own thinking and being as influenced by the past – tradition – is developed and built. Because of the basic conversational structure of these sets of relationships, the various elements in them are distinguishable but not finally disparate; as in conversation, the event of the relation determines the character of the whole.

That which allows for the oscillation between part and whole, between person and event which leads to understanding, is the 'medium of language' (*TM*, 389). For Gadamer, language is primarily verbal – all 'hermeneutical experience is verbal in nature' (*TM*, 443) – and 'has its true being only in dialogue' (*TM*, 446). These two provisions allow Gadamer to avoid different problematic assertions regarding language in our time; for if language is primarily verbal, then it fits within a conversation, arises from what has been said, looks to what will be said next, anticipates a response to what is thought in it: all meaning is provisional and contextual, revisable and partial (which just means all understanding is interpretative); and if language finds its true realisation in dialogue, then language is not an end in itself but rather the enabling condition for understanding and relating – it is not an object nor does it objectify – it is rather intimately linked with being and with thinking, in a way that does not accord any one domination over the other in the overall event of understanding.

Language is what allows the finite human to be as a relational person; it furnishes his own experience with cognitive content and gives him the tools to turn towards an other in openness; it is the condition of the possibility of the realisation of his own meaning, and the genuine understanding of the meaning of an other. Indeed, language stretches across

hermeneutical distance and enables the person and other to relate on common ground. The common ground of language is, though, something built up and established in the process of conversation. This is accomplished out of the intimate unity of language and understanding, and also out of the flexibility the medium of language attains in the process of our making it our own. For just as the process of increasing awareness and personal appropriation of meaning in one's life involves the progress from being conditioned by conventional language to gaining some authentic control and realisation of one's own person through language, within a conversation conventional or idiosyncratic uses of language are progressively undone or honed into a language particular to the conversation and within which an understanding is begun that follows from the subject matter and is accessible to both interlocutors.

In contrast to the personal horizon of thought particular to a man or an age, language breaks past personal finitude and allows for the establishment of the 'one great horizon' (*TM*, 304). Gadamer's notion of the 'one great horizon' is his fundamental assertion that humans and ages are never finally cut off from understanding each other – that the possibility of the hermeneutic event is universal, and even when there is real distance (in Gadamer's language, 'alienation') between persons, it is hermeneutically enabling – that is, two 'shores' may sustain a bridge.³

The conversation with the other, although more visible and perhaps accorded more importance, depends on the relation of man with his past – the person in conversation with his tradition. For Gadamer, this relationship is no less real than that with the other. He writes that 'the way tradition is understood and expressed ever anew in language is an event no less genuine than living conversation' (*TM*, 471). Tradition is the ground, the everyday existential reality which allows for the realisation of the person, and indeed is a necessary part of one's reality, of what Gadamer sees as an integral part of human meaning: 'A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of [his fundamental relatedness] changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond. *A person who reflects himself out of a living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition in exactly the same way*' (*TM*, 360). The relationships with the other

³ It is interesting to note the similarities between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Donald Davidson's philosophy of language; the account of language and understanding presented above lies close to Davidson's, in three of his essays in particular: 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford UP), 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', and 'Seeing Through Language' (in *Truth, Language, and History*, Oxford UP).

person and with one's own tradition enable one to be one's own; they temper one's thinking, and allow for clarification of what one is living – one's meaning, one's person. To see oneself as part of a tradition, to recognise the place of tradition in one's life – this allows one to see clearly how and to what extent one determines and is determined in one's thinking and being. Recognising one's part in a tradition means that one is able to be a part of the larger conversation of the past and present, without needing to say everything all over again oneself.

III.

Tradition grounds, defines, limits, opens, and enables meaningful conversation. Meaningful tradition is based in language, and it is through language as a flexible medium that we come into our different conversations, make meaning our own, and relate with one another. Language limits us (we must seek to distinguish between convention and the authentic word in what is said), but due to its open-ended, dialogic nature, gives us the means to pass beyond our particular (without leaving it behind) and to participate in something larger than us. Indeed, for Gadamer, this is the only way in which we speak, and our conversations have authentic reality insofar as these are understood as effective conditions.

Tradition is what makes us and is made by us. It is the set of meaningful ways of relating and understanding that provides humans with continuity and place, and lends thickness to the particular human experience. There are three different aspects of tradition to be brought out here: firstly, to be a part of a tradition is to be a part of a furnished, meaningful event; secondly, the character of tradition as 'something handed on' realises itself most vividly in the ordinary orality of everyday life; thirdly, the locus of traditional meaning, although variously referring to beginnings and ends, is often (and, arguably, most profoundly) found in reiterative events, in the ontological character of feastdays or festivals, and in the various rhythms of daily or seasonal activities. Of course, not every tradition, however construed, will fit neatly with these characteristics. But there are reasons why this way of understanding tradition is particularly fruitful. For a tradition sets up the world for the person, emphasizes parts, bestows meaning on various things and events, and always already interprets certain things according to its fundamental understanding of life. The fundamental ways of relating and bestowing meaning are, furthermore, realised not only occasionally but constantly, from the outset of all

experiencing and thinking, in every way. The manner, moreover, in which meaning is bestowed is not via a kind of repetition or copying, but rather the event *is again* what it *is originally*.

Traditional meaning is understood ontologically, not historically. So to be a part of a tradition is not only to participate in its various events but also to recognise the overall sense given to the events, and to realise that validity is granted to the tradition both by participation and by recognition. Moreover, to be a part of a tradition means that one has a certain awareness of the depths of the present, of all the inherited and relational aspects that go into making the present what it is – including one's own part played in the bestowal of meaning. Tradition deepens the present, helps to form the disposition out of which the present is interpreted, and while depending on one's relationship with it also partly determines all the ways in which a person relates and takes part in different conversations – that is, it partly determines all the ways in which a person *thinks* and *is*. The kind of thinking present here, concerned with the meaning of being, is what can be called religious thinking.

IV.

The character and expression of religious thinking, out of tradition and within conversation, is an important question for man in our time. For it can be argued that the thinking that dominates the different spheres of modern human reality – whether public, private, or academic – has the quality of religious thinking.

For our purposes here, religious thinking has several features: it is passionate thinking – thinking that we only partly choose but also undergo, that sways us with its presence; it touches the deepest part of what we understand to be our own meaning, whether or not we recognise this consciously; and it maintains, at its core, an understanding of what it means to be human and, alongside this understanding, how and to what human beings are related significantly.

Regarding particular details, there can be no doubt that religious thinking primarily originates in a view of reality as constituted by humans and God or gods; the great world religions attest to this, and have given us important myths of humans and the divine. In these various understandings, which give rise to various traditions, there is often an understood structure to reality, with an emphasis on the place of a deity, and an understanding of what is important or real in life. Here, the understanding of meaning is (primarily) *received*, revealed to

humans by a god or a prophet. It is a world in which a deity grants meaning and being, and, at best, in which humans are present and open to the meaning granted being.

This particular way of understanding the details of religious thought is seen by some to be outmoded or archaic, and thoroughly critiqued and deconstructed by different trends in modern thought. However, I want to argue that this assertion is problematic: for not only have the older forms of religious thinking maintained sway over many people – true, often in a distorted or simplistic form – but furthermore, much of modern thought has maintained the structure of religious thought, complete with deities, revelations, and being and meaning granted by an other. (Perhaps only certain forms of novelistic thinking evade the religious structure.) Without claiming too much for this idea, a look at the approaches of three modern thinkers may give some sense of what one might call ‘religious thought after religion’.

Milan Kundera, whose art of the novel is an ‘interrogative meditation’ (*Art of the Novel*, hereafter *AN*, 29) on human existence, dwells at length in several of his works on how meaning occurs and is lost for his characters. Two features stand out: first, meaning is bestowed on a character via certain theme words, key words which shape and are shaped by her. These key words, often unchosen, hold sway over her whole being, determining to some extent who she is, and compel her to confront, encounter, and try to make sense of them. Indeed, Kundera has mentioned that it seems to him that ‘a novel is often ... nothing but a long quest for some elusive definitions’ (*AN*, 127) of certain important thematic words. Secondly, the theme of the ‘border’ plays an important role for Kundera. The border, for any given character, is the enigmatic limit to personal meaning; beyond the border, ‘everything – love, conviction, faith, history – no longer has meaning’ (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 281). In Kundera’s novels, the words and borders of his characters are partially unchosen, even given for the most part. Moreover, the presence of the words that grant meaning and the borders that maintain meaning is a tenuous presence, indeterminate and not necessarily engaging. Kundera’s novels are a personal, existential questioning, an attempt to understand how we make and are made by our own meaning.

Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian of religions, writes about how human life, both personal and communal, relates religiously. At the centre of Eliade’s understanding of the question of religion is his idea of man as *homo religiosus* – the being for whom meaning is the most important thing, and for whom something meaningful is sacred. Religious thinking, then, is

a way of thinking; a fundamental organisation of the world into what is real (the sacred) and what is not. Eliade writes that ‘when we think of the sacred we must not limit it to divine figures. The sacred does not necessarily imply belief in God or gods or spirits. ... [it] is the experience of a reality and the source of an awareness of existing in the world. What is this consciousness that makes us men? It is the result of that experience of the sacred, of the division that occurs between the real and the unreal’ (*Ordeal by Labyrinth*, hereafter *OL*, 154). He writes that ‘to be human is to seek for meaning, for value – to invent it, project it, reinvent it’ (*OL*, 167).

Martin Heidegger, who thinks the ancient and modern relation of men and gods, understands man as the being for whom being is the question. While the questioning of being progressively becomes understood as something like an attentive awaiting and preparing for the disclosure of Being, in his *Discourse on Thinking* Heidegger speaks of an ‘openness to the mystery’ and a ‘releasement toward things’ which lie within a ‘meditative thinking ... which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is’ (*DT*, 55, 54, 46). Increasingly in his later thinking Heidegger leaves aside his earlier emphasis on Dasein and speaks instead of ‘the fourfold’ – mortals, divinities, earth, and sky – and how thinking and language fit into the basic structure of being.⁴ In the fourfold, humans are measured over against the gods, and find their meaning in terms of this relationship, along with earth and sky. This is a way of seeing, setting up, placing the human in a cosmos, furnished and meaningful, requiring but not determined by humans.

Kundera, Eliade, and Heidegger do not speak out of any of the major religions, yet they illuminate certain aspects of what I want to call religious thinking. In almost all thinking, there are what may be called deities present or assumed, whether implicitly or explicitly: there is some given, a basic ground or idea, even if not a ‘god’ or ‘metaphysical’ thing, that determines the features of that thinking. Without requiring that these deities mean anything otherworldly, although for many religious traditions they mean precisely this, we may call this idea the question of transcendence.

The idea of transcendence, common to the great world religions, is not foreign to religious thinking. In thinking about religious thinking and dialogue, then, the question of transcendence, not explicitly dealt with in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, becomes insistent. How can

⁴ See for instance his collection of essays *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. Perennial Classics, 2001.

transcendence and conversation be reconciled, if at all? After delineating the features of this question, I will turn to Eastern Christianity, my own tradition, to see what kind of response is found in its theology. Again, as with the question of religious thinking, 'transcendence' will be thought in terms of a worldview assuming the divine; if this thinking has any insight, it will spill over into what may be said about 'religious thought after religion'.

V.

The question of the relationship between transcendence (and its close correlate revelation) and tradition (understood on the model of conversation) is difficult. A general definition of transcendence might include concepts such as a given or revealed statement, something beyond or outside everyday human life, or the idea of the eternal. Often, the transcendent is contrasted with the immanent, what is of and only of this world, and partakes of the various conditions of this world. For example, Gadamer's understanding of conversation, understanding, truth, and meaning arguably does not require any fixed, other point of reference for it to make sense.

The place of transcendence in different religious traditions often colours its teaching about the person, the world, and the divine, and gives shape and character to how this basic relating has meaning. The transcendent also impacts how the tradition understands notions of truth and revelation, for the truth of things (either to do with knowledge or with morality) is often understood to arise out of a revelation, given from a transcendent thing, in a way which demands discovery and conformation more than a making or a realisation; and revelation often involves a correct or proper way of acting and knowing which is given in purity, as a law or rule.

The place of conversation (on Gadamer's paradigm) in religion and tradition has two aspects: conversation within one's own tradition, and conversation with other religious traditions. These two conversations can be understood also in terms of understanding one's own, and understanding the other. Conversation in order to understand one's own is perhaps less problematic, for it involves an effort in clarification or illumination of certain difficult ideas or practices. Despite the potential difficulty of this undertaking, it is still within a common framework or understanding that the conversation occurs, which eases things quite a bit.⁵

⁵ Today this is a suggestion of hope. At the high points of culture, when understanding and self-articulation are at their best, understanding one's own is better accomplished; now, we inherit

Conversation with other religious traditions is more problematic from the outset, for unlike conversation within a religious tradition, conversation across traditions must face the fact of different sets of revelations and determining truths, and this along with the immediate lack of common ground renders a dialogue difficult to begin and to sustain.

The difficulties around the idea of conversation between traditions bring forth the question of the purpose of conversation. What *is* the purpose? To be right? To understand? To be present? The answer to these questions depends, in part, on how the religious tradition, of whatever persuasion, understands itself and the role of the transcendent. For two possible dangers are present in any consideration of transcendence: first, that transcendence be understood as a deferring or emptying of meaningful reality from our earthly life – that our life here has reality only in terms of an afterlife; and second, that transcendence gives rise to an idea of truth as some kind of received philosophical or metaphysical statement or given moral schema.

These two understandings of the meaning of transcendence need to be challenged, for, against Gadamer's notion of truth and understanding, and against the openness and presence characterised by the three examples of 'religious thinking', these two dangers seem to threaten the possibility of 'religious dialogue'. Each 'danger' does indeed fall away from the model of conversation, for they each take truth to be a fixed idea with the origin of its reality elsewhere – somewhere other than this world, as we know it in our everyday life. But are these dangers avoidable, when talking of religious thinking in the strict sense? Does conversation, essentially open, finally stumble against the different 'closed' traditions of revelation and practice? These questions insist, most of all, on the first 'conversation' above – the conversation with one's own tradition. For only in experiencing and understanding and loving one's own is it then possible to turn to the other and see what one has to offer. The conversation with one's own is a prerequisite for engaging with the other in conversation. It allows for a mutual measuring – the reality of conversation with the reality of the religious – and in this measuring the slow establishment, the careful fitting of criteria to our real human relationships.

something so fragmented, so thoroughly saturated with the hermeneutics of suspicion and an inability to remember the past or to see continuity that even conversation with our own has become difficult. Our capacity is apparent, but our thinking lags behind.

To this end, a brief look at two aspects of Eastern Christian theology is appropriate. For Eastern Christianity has a very interesting way of understanding the human relationship with the divine and with the other, and thinks human reality in a way important for our understanding of these topics.⁶

VI.

Out of the experience of the Incarnation of Christ, Eastern Christianity (distinct from its western counterpart) can be seen as primarily a teaching about what it means to be human, which means to be incarnate, and thus mortal. From this standpoint ideas of the divine and of the other arise, but the emphasis in our theology lies primarily on the experience of human being as personal and in communion. Understanding man as a personal being, as a ‘living soul’, non-dualistic but with the possibility of participation in the resurrected and everlasting life of Christ, means understanding man as a being with the capacity for communion. The personal and communal modes of being are not forced, however. At the heart of man lies the freedom to reject this way of life.

What is revealed, then, within our theology, is an understanding of human reality and meaning, in reference but not deferred to what is sometimes called paradise or the afterlife. Indeed, these terms are perhaps misleading for us when we speak of the transcendent, for they often imply a denigration of this world. In contrast, Eastern Christianity approaches the divine somewhat differently. Alexander Schmemmann writes that: ‘the essence of Christianity is eschatological. ... ‘Eschatological’ means that Christianity is directed, at the same time and totally, both on ‘Now’ and on the Kingdom to come – that the experience of the Kingdom is completely dependent on the experience of ‘Now’ (*Journal*, 204). David Goa has called this an ‘eschatology of being’, in contrast with an ‘eschatology of time’. For Eastern Christians, the reality of the Kingdom is not put off until we end our earthly lives; rather, with the distinction not of ‘life’ and ‘afterlife’, but of the ‘presence of the Kingdom’ and the ‘fulness of the Kingdom’ – that what we live now, according to our communion, is what we will live later, only in its fullness – the sacredness and goodness of our reality is now affirmed. In his essay ‘Asking

⁶ In what follows, my understanding has been formed not only out of my own experience, but also through conversations with and the writings of Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, David Goa, and John Kalomiros, and through the works of Christos Yannaras.

the Fathers' Goa writes that '[t]he presence of the Kingdom is at the very centre of human experience. The presence of the Kingdom is what is real in life' (6). What is real for us here now is not the denial of the fulness of the Kingdom, but rather the absolute presence of sacred reality in our daily experience, as persons in communion. Puhalo goes so far as to say that 'this single unity of heavenly and earthly is the essential meaning of Orthodoxy' (*Freedom to Believe*, 71).

VII.

To be human is to be a person – to have the capacity for true personhood. In his freedom, man may choose to reject personhood, to distort it or debase his innate capacity for personhood. Yannaras writes that 'man was created to become a partaker in the personal mode of existence which is the life of God – to become a partaker in the freedom of love which is true life' (*Freedom of Morality*, hereafter *FM*, 19). The image of humans as persons is fairly concrete: we are mortal beings, facing the other, with the capacity for free and loving communion with him or her. Personhood has no reality outside of the event of relating, and our knowledge and being arise from this fact. Personhood means freedom and relationship, it means love and presence, and finally it means communion.

Humans as persons are relational beings: by our nature, we are always already in relation to the other, to the world, and to God. To fulfill these relationships requires freedom and a purposeful orientation, for, as with our first parents, the capacity for forgetting the reality of these relationships is always present. The proper way of relating to the other, to the world, and to God is in love, which means to be present to the reality and particular beauty of the other, to hold his being in regard as something good and precious, and to cherish and nourish his own divinity, insofar as he realises it in his person. When the event of loving presence, person to person, occurs, it is a time of communion – a time when the human mirrors the divine, in the image we are granted of the divine as a Trinity of loving 'co-inherence' of life ... life which is identified with self-offering love' (Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, hereafter *EF*, 36). In the event of loving presence, the other one faces is known as person – that is, he is known as a being who is primarily relational, confronting what is not him; his reality is bound up in this act of relating, and so the only road to knowledge of him is to meet him in the grounds of this relation – in conversation. To be a person is to be in relation, to be in conversation.

Encompassed in this image of man as person are most of the characteristics and sources of identity usually associated with being human: here is the oneness of the divine image in man, his essence realised as unique particular, the only source of his morality (the measure of his presence in love), and the meaning of his being. Man was created to be in love, to respond to 'God's call to personal communion with Himself, the call which bestows being' (Yannaras, *FM*, 30); this, in part, is the personal recognition that 'the created nature of man', realised personally, 'is 'opposite' God: it exists as a reference and relation to God' (Yannaras, *FM*, 20-21).

God 'calls' to us, we respond to His call, and in doing so realise the presence of what has been revealed to us: the person existing in loving communion, present to the sacred reality of our world, in reference and worshipful relation to our Creator, the source of our life. This human event, the oneness of the human and the divine, is the primary source of truth appropriate to the Eastern Christian tradition. In this event we have the measure, the guiding criteria for our theology – an incarnate truth.

If we can understand the idea of incarnate truth as loving presence to the divine – whether God, the world, or the other – then we have two examples for our own efforts to attain this truth: the person of Jesus Christ, and the figures of the saints. Christ is the perfect union of divine and human, as God Incarnate, as the greatness of God revealed in human form. As Goa emphasises, Christ did two things here on earth: He blessed, and He healed. 'To bless is a simple elemental act of recognition that all that is given is, in its being, sacred', Goa writes, while to heal is to make whole, to return to life in communion with the divine. Goa adds that 'the life of blessing and healing is a life in time, a life concerned with the ultimate meaning' of each human encounter and earthly event ('The Time of the Kingdom', 18, 19).

As perfect God and perfect man, Jesus Christ lived a life of love; as such, He is our supreme example. After Christ, the saints on their paths of holiness provide another vivid example. The testimony of the saints is given to us primarily by their experience of the struggle to be present to divine reality. In their lives the saints faced, entered into relation with, and sought the presence of the divine on earth. The testimony of the writings of the saints can therefore be a difficult heritage, for they do not seek to present us with any systematic theologies or abstract directives. Instead, what we have are verbal expressions of their experiential struggles to live divine presence, to realise the incarnate truth that the Church teaches is the meaning of Christ. What we learn from Christ and the saints is the experience of how to be present, in love,

to the divine. The faith of the Church, in and of the tradition, means just this: openness and presence to the divine reality everywhere coming to greet us.

The saints also teach us about the meaning and occurrence of sin. In our tradition, sin means ‘missing the mark’ of life – life as love and communion. Sin is whatever takes us away from the divine presence, whatever diverts or distorts our love of Christ. Two ways in which this happens, the two great sins, are idolatry and heresy.

Idolatry, as the problem of false deities, the mistaking of something unreal for something real, causes us to see what is not there. As such, it causes us to mistake our way, to not be present to what we face, and in this robs us of our own reality and that of the other. It offers an image of life in place of life, and as soon as we believe the image, we lose our capacity to be present to what is real, and, as such, for divinity.

In contrast, the problem of heresy is not that we imagine a different reality, but that we mistake the reality in front of us. Heresy is the perversion, distortion, or clouding of the truth we face. This is often accomplished through a misplaced emphasis, an according of inappropriate importance to a part to the detriment of the whole, an elevation of one part of the whole truth to an absolute value in itself, and so on.

These two ways of ‘missing the mark’ of life – of missing reality – have acquired a substantial amount of literature around them, for what they are really is an other mode of being than personhood, and the ways in which they fundamentally misunderstand, over and over again, what we call ‘life in Christ’, are manifold. A mode of being has at its heart a basic way of relating, an understanding of life and existence – a thinking. In contrast to this ‘mistaken’ thinking, Eastern Christianity offers a thinking of life as presence and love and communion, as preparing for and attending to the particular mortal encounter with another person, outside of idolatry and heresy. In being present to the particular mortal person, we seek to encounter and to affirm – to bless – the personhood of the other – the image and possibility of divinity in him. In recognising the divine in the person encountered, in being present to him and loving him, we come close to the model our tradition has for expressing, insofar as it is possible, the experience of the divine. Indeed, our liturgical language for the divine, for the ineffability of God, arises out of the experience of presence, love, and communion in our humanity. Eastern Christianity does not speak too often directly of the divine, leaving the fullest extent of our knowledge to experience. Our apophatic tradition, which Yannaras calls an apophaticism of the person (to

distinguish it from an apophaticism of essence) is mainly a tradition of sounding out the idolatries and heresies which prevent presence; it sets up the enabling conditions, the faithful disposition needed, for the event of divine presence – and leaves this event unsaid, or spoken only in terms of certain metaphorical images which are evidently inadequate to reality. In an appropriate insight, Gadamer writes that ‘every word breaks forth as if from a centre and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole worldview that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries along with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning’ (*TM*, 458).

Each theological word carries along with it a whole experience of the Christian tradition of the Eastern Church, of our way of thinking and being. Each theological word belongs to an understanding of what it means to be human: to be incarnate and mortal; to be in relation to the other, the world, and God; to be present to, to cultivate a regard for, to love and know in love the person of the other, human and divine. And since a word uttered is, as Gadamer says, a conversational act, we might see the Christian conversation as one of love for, of presence to, and of communion with the reality in its incarnate and ineffable truth.

Afterword to the Essay

There is a difficulty in writing an essay based in two traditions; it is even more difficult if the two traditions – Gadamerian hermeneutics and Eastern Christianity – are not nearly as well known as they deserve. Because of this, the ‘sense’ given different words may be missed – a common enough and rectifiable thing in a conversation, but a problematic thing in an essay, where ‘hearing’ a word’s sense otherwise than intended can lead to confusion or assumption. This is a problem especially because for both hermeneutics and Eastern Christianity the printed word presents only terms and names, without the content and meaning of experience, worked out in the presence of personal conversation and relating. With this in mind, it may be helpful to note a few things about what has been said, in particular about Eastern Christianity.

To begin with, I understand tradition in a positive way, or at least as a notion with positive potential. Tradition is a ‘language of meaning’, not a set of ossified ideas handed down, given and received without thought. As a ‘language of meaning’, it provides us with the ground, measure, and horizon for human meaning and being in the world – it enables an articulable orientation in the world, with others.

Tradition is not ideology, which is a narrower, often reactive, response to a perceived cultural or spiritual malaise; as such, an ideology allows itself to be defined by what it opposes, and so has limited scope and applicability – like a spotlight, often it sheds light on one issue or aspect, but leaves others in the dark. This in its turn becomes problematic if the illumined or addressed aspect of life is mistaken for the whole or most of life – if it becomes an intellectual prism through which each idea and encounter is interpreted.

It is important to note a difference here: both tradition and ideology claim a vision of life on the whole, both become or assume the position of a thinking orientation towards the other and the world. But whereas this is what a religious tradition, in the proper sense, is meant to do, for an ideology, borne of some insight into a loss or need of a part of life, to colour one’s whole vision of life can be disastrous and dangerous. Part of an ideology’s danger is that with the colouring of one’s vision, the significant features and whole meaning of a situation or event is determined beforehand – that is, predetermined. Out of an ideological consciousness, the narrower focus becomes the prism for all of life, and what is important in an event or situation is not to be freely present to what is occurring, but to figure how the event reinforces or illustrates this or that ideological truth.

To be sure, religious traditions can become ideological – in fact, this is often exactly what happens. For a religious tradition, though, the slip into a narrowing, predetermining mindset comes about differently – often through how the tradition understands revelation and its own beginning. For the central truths of the tradition’s revelation, whether propositional or personal, sway one’s thinking and being. The extent and kind of claims of meaning and interpretation a religious tradition makes about the person, world, and the divine, and how this in turn determines in advance one’s experience of meaning remains a very difficult question that demands rigorous, lucid, and subtle thinking addressing the details of particular times and events.

It is possible, though, to begin to address some of the ideas around how a religious tradition becomes ideology. First, central to the solidification of thought (of ideology) is a solidification of language, as belief that a certain description of a thing will remain true. This thought can be put into the form of a set of questions: what is the relationship between language and reality? How adequate is language in describing or speaking of either the divine or the ‘limit experiences’ of humans? Again, the issue returns to the question of transcendence: how do we relate to and speak about what seems to be outside of or beyond our everyday human experiences? In part, this question is determined by a distinction between the content and the condition of our experience of the transcendent.

Almost all of what has been written in Eastern Christian theology focuses on what could provisionally be called the conditions of our experience of the transcendent. In our language of meaning, the approach to the divine is *apophatic*. Apophaticism has two aspects: first, when thinking of propositional truth, it is the ‘refusal to exhaust knowledge of the truth in its formulation’ (Yannaras, *EF*, 17); second, the apophatic approach cultivates a disposition of openness and silence in the face of the divine. Apophaticism enables presence (the condition of our experience), and as such remains an essentially human characteristic. For how seriously we believe our own characterisations of the divine matters to humans, not to the divine – it affects us, not God. And because the Eastern Christian revelation is primarily about what it means to be human, our notions of the divine and of transcendence cannot be focused primarily on attempting to describe the features of heaven or the divine, but rather how what has been revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ and the very human testaments of the saints enables us to be open to the other person and to the divine.

The openness of the Eastern Christian tradition finds its concrete expression in ‘cosuffering love’. In love, it is impossible to describe in advance the nature of the beloved – indeed, to think in this way (looking for a ‘nature’) is misguided. Rather, to love is to be open to and to take delight in the being of the other person, as and when it is encountered – to be present to the other in love.

The Eastern Christian understanding of love is biblical, and thus our tradition sees love essentially as erotic experience. For it is in erotic love – sensual and personal, encompassing the richness of the whole being of the other – that we come to knowledge of the other in the profoundest sense of knowing (we ‘know in love’...⁷). It is for this reason that we speak of the Church as the ‘Bride of Christ’, and Jesus Christ as the ‘lover of humankind’, and why such rich meaning is granted to marriage in the Eastern tradition. The centrality of the biblical, erotic understanding of love to the Eastern Christian tradition, alongside the determining apophatic approach of presence and openness to the divine, provides the significant framework within which an event is lived, a person encountered, and prayer offered in worship.

It is interesting to note that much of the meaningful language around the Eastern Christian understanding of person, world, and divine, while rich in song and symbolism (showing relations), has to do with the ‘negative’ effort of sounding out and resisting human projections and idolatry. For apophatic presence and loving attention are not primarily propositional attitudes, but truths of disposition, of faithful thinking. Because of this, there is less of an urge to put into propositional form the various ‘limit experiences’ of humans; further, because the fundamental model on which we learn to relate and be present to the divine is that of love, the beauty of the poetic, concrete expression of human longing, doubt, loss, regard, wonder, and struggle found in prayer and worship does not allow the forgetting of human effort and finitude. However, the poetic, personal language of meaning also demonstrates the profundity and beauty of human being, but in such a way that it is clear that the truth of things is

⁷ The Hebrew notion of ‘knowing in love’ holds together two aspects for us here: first, that our erotic longing for the other is directed toward the whole person of the other, even (or especially) including those parts of their being that I do not and cannot know – their essential mystery – which is recognised as beautiful; second, that the understanding that part of the knowing in love of the other means cultivating a regard for their ‘mystery’ is what Yannaras means by ‘apophaticism of the person’, and what it means for humankind to be created ‘in the image and likeness of God’.

not exhausted in how it is said – poetic saying gestures beyond itself in a way that propositional language cannot.

A human, poetic language, expressing longing for a lover, indicates as much about the speaker as it does about the one addressed, illuminating one's struggles and desires as much as it points to their ends. Because of this, the capacity for a critique of idolatry and heresy – the two great ways of mistaking life – is always present. And when we are free of idolatry, when we come to know our freedom so we do not need to project onto the world, we are present to what is real, and our presence to what is real is what makes it possible for that moment to be salvific.

Finally, there is only one reality, in the language of the Eastern tradition. To speak of either 'divine' or 'earthly' reality is only to emphasise in order to facilitate understanding, not to point towards two things with an abyss in between.

* * *

Any effort towards a clarification of terms and references runs into the difficulty of association. In the 'West', where Greek and Latin philosophy have determined to a large extent all thinking thereafter, to say with assurance that Eastern Christianity is neither Platonic, Aristotelian, nor Augustinian may come as a surprise. This is especially the case where one grounded in the 'Western' experience of tradition and philosophy sees that some terms coincide but forgets that the world behind the word differs significantly. It is something known only through patient experience and thoughtful conversation.⁸

⁸ Much of this essay arose out of conversations with David Goa, who deserves gratitude and regard for his willing help.

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