

Thoughts on Suffering and Death

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Writing about suffering and death can be a delicate undertaking, since both are connected to so much emotion and so many doctrines. Many received ideas about these subjects arose in the pre-scientific era, when perceptions of medicine were deeply mixed with superstitions and were often based on misinterpretation of various sacred texts. I am going to look at these subjects from a twenty-first-century perspective rather than one formed in the late Iron Age. This may cause some unease to the more conservative reader.

We will begin with the allegory at the beginning of the book of Genesis. I refer to this passage as an allegory because we know that it is certainly not an historical record. The first five books of the Hebrew Scripture were given their final form around the year 550 BC, during the Babylonian exile of the leaders of Judea. This is the period when Judaism developed into a formal monotheistic religion, thanks to the prophet Isaiah and the reforms of Josiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

The story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the advent of death has theological implications that are often misunderstood. From an Orthodox Christian patristic point of view, death was never a punishment from God, but rather a natural result of alienating oneself from the source of life. In fact, the story of Eden and the fall should be seen as descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Instead of imposing a set of conditions, the narrative describes a state of affairs.

We have no concept of a naturally immortal soul occupying a mortal body. Immortality is a property of God alone, and human beings can be immortal only by grace. This principle is elementary to the theology of theosis. The human being, body and soul, was created and therefore is mortal. Adam and Eve's separating themselves, alienating themselves from God—who is the source of life—quite naturally resulted in mortality, expressed in spiritual death. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, the soul is immortal by grace, and the body is an integral part of the person. We believe in the resurrection and transfiguration of the hypostasis that we call “the whole person.”

Now let us look at the history of the particular connection between the origins of sex and the origins of death. The association of sex and death, not coincidentally, is recognized in both biological science and religion. The two are closely bound together as an evolutionary artifact of the ancient “merge for survival” strategy of haploid microbes. We can see this connection in modern bacteria—which are prokaryotes and are very promiscuous ones at that—but it dates back over two billion years.

Let me explain why transgenic reproductive sex is directly connected to the

reason almost all life forms experience aging and death. We should clarify that in terms of biological science, the broad meaning of the word *sex* is the exchange of genetic material. It should not be understood in a prurient manner or confused with gender. To (over)simplify the matter: cells that clone themselves by means of binary fission—mitosis—might be thought of as “immortal,” because when the cell divides it does not die or go out of existence. It simply creates a clone, producing a copy of its own DNA and transferring it to the clone. By contrast, organisms that copulate and exchange genetic material, that is, sexually reproduce—meiosis—develop complex organisms and expend a huge amount of energy for growth and survival. They are multicellular, and must regulate mitosis to prevent what we now call cancer from consuming the organism. Among other things, this is done by a mechanism called apoptosis, a kind of programmed cell death. Aging and death evolved in ancient protocists that adapted to sexual reproduction. Eventually, the organism created by this process must age and die.

This scientific background on the origins of cell death can inform our discussion of the problem of suffering and death. After all, the religious association of sex and sexual desire with the fall of humankind and the origin of death resonates with biological science. The inevitable death of sexually reproducing bodies is part of the reality of our existence that religion has long realized. More recently, biological science has explained how meiotic fertilization and sex cycles evolved in our protocist ancestors—themselves descendants of immortal bacteria—and resulted in the creation of death.

In the story of Eden and the fall, we are given an insight into the condition

of humanity itself. Perhaps we should approach the Hebrew Scripture in this context, since it consistently reveals to us the conditions and conflicts, both internal and external, of humankind in general, and the hypostasis that is the individual person in particular. If God intended for us to be or become immortal by grace through union with Him, then alienation from God, the source of life, made our mortality supreme. Our mortality separated us further from God, and through fear of death, the human being came into a form of moral bondage. The very meaning of Pascha (Passover) is the ultimate overcoming of the power of death (not necessarily our mortality) by and through Jesus Christ. Consequently, being ransomed from mortality, we are redeemed from bondage. By grace, through Jesus Christ, we can attain theosis and fulfil God’s desire for us, that we become immortal.

The problem of death for humans—that is, the problem of our alienation from God—manifests itself often in our lives, where we are even alienated from our own self. The only solution to this problem is found in Jesus Christ who, in himself, manifested the reconciliation of God and humankind. The biological origins of death, which we inherited from our protocist ancestors, does not diminish this fact. Science defines a process, not the advent of humankind, which, while a product of evolution, unfolded according to God’s will. We discuss it because it is the true state of affairs, and in our century, we need to be aware of reality in order ultimately to maintain a living faith in the living God. Literalists trying to apply what Alfred North Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” will simply not do. If we try to interpret allegories or metaphor as reality, then we end up only with mythologies devoid of meaning.



Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Fragment of a church floor mosaic, northern Syria, late 5th or early 6th century. Cleveland Museum of Art.

In comparison to death, the problem of suffering is perhaps the more difficult to theologize about. I have no intention of offering platitudes about suffering. I am not going to try to excuse it either. Suffering does not ennoble us, nor does it in itself elevate our spiritual condition. The manner in which we choose to face and endure suffering can elevate us spiritually, however. If suffering is

inescapable, enduring it patiently, with faith and prayer, can ennoble us and enrich our spiritual being. Suffering itself, however, is humiliating and degrading, and to try to alleviate and overcome human suffering is a noble pursuit.

The fact that hundreds of thousands of children suffer from starvation and disease, with no hope of attaining even

to the teenage years, does not ennoble those children and does nothing for their spiritual lives. People afflicted with horrendous physical suffering are not thereby ennobled. We suffer because we have a neural system and can feel pain, hunger, thirst, and so forth. The vulnerability of our physiology to assault by disease and external forces is what causes our physical suffering. Mental and emotional suffering are another category of pain. Those who are truly noble and spiritually elevated dedicate themselves to alleviating pain and suffering. We have made considerable progress in dealing with human suffering, and those who still seek to overcome it for humanity are the true nobility, the truly spiritual persons. The time for mythically glorifying human suffering belongs in the ruins and rubble of the past.

For people of faith, patiently and prayerfully enduring inescapable suffering can bring spiritual elevation. In fact, patiently enduring suffering can ennoble even people without faith. However, we should dispense with the ugly myth that God actually appreciates or enjoys suffering, to the degree that he will listen less to the prayers of people who are not voluntarily suffering in order to strengthen their prayers, but will listen more to prayers which are accompanied by unnecessary and self-induced suffering. To liken such self-induced suffering to the voluntary and saving suffering of Jesus Christ seems to me quite arrogant, perhaps narcissistic. We pray for the sick and suffering that God will alleviate their suffering and heal their sickness. Nowhere do we pray that God will increase their suffering so that they may experience spiritual elevation.

Myths about human suffering may have had a place in an era when we did not understand it, could not alleviate it, and had no medical way to respond

to it, because that sort of mythology at least offered some psychological ointment. The study of medicine to find ways to avoid and alleviate suffering is, however, far more noble and far more spiritual. Indeed, medicine was considered a ministry in the early Church, and in the Byzantine era this ministry was based in the hospital, in contrast to the hospice concept that prevailed in Western Europe. In fact, the Byzantine Empire sought to develop something close to a universal healthcare system.

Perhaps these developments in the Church give us a basis for responding to suffering. We should look not only at physical suffering but equally at mental and emotional suffering. We experience suffering because we are living organisms, and all living creatures have episodes of suffering (mass suffering, such as periods of famine and natural disasters, is quite another matter, and calls for a massive response from humanity). However, we often suffer mentally and emotionally not only because of chemical imbalances in the brain, but because of our alienations.

Since humankind fell into a state of alienation from God, we are all born into this state of affairs, and we often continue to make that alienation greater. This condition finds us not only alienated from our creator, but also from one another, and very often from our own selves. We are creatures in a state of interrupted development. The Old Testament is really a record of humanity's failures and of the idolatry that has been part of our struggle from time immemorial. The Old Testament is not the story of a long-gone people. Rather, it is the story of us, of each one of us individually and of all of us as a species. We created gods who demanded human sacrifice, because nature—with which we are in disharmony—randomly and brutally took the lives of our children and adults

in ways we could never understand. People simply thought they were giving the deities of nature what they wanted.

Even when God revealed himself to us, we projected some of the very worst attributes of our fallen humanity onto him and made an idolatry of our concepts of the living God. The forces of nature brought suffering upon us, and in our imagination and lack of understanding, we attributed those forces of nature which cause us pain and suffering to God himself. We still have trouble with that kind of residual paganism within us. Nevertheless, because the image of God is innate in us, we can struggle toward understanding and controlling the suffering that we endure. Jesus Christ revealed this idolatry to us and showed us that God does not randomly inflict pain and suffering upon us.

To the contrary, we understand from Christ that seeking to overcome sufferings—not our own, but those of others

as well—is an essential human ministry. Searching for ways to alleviate pain and suffering began in prehistoric times and developed slowly over the ages. It passed through stages of trying to use magic and amulets to the gradual emergence of science and medicine, beginning especially with Hippocrates and with the pharmacology of India. In the early Christian Church, it was seen as a sacred ministry.

We have been inspired by Christ, through His Church, to have a sincere concern for the sufferings of others—of other nations, of other tribes, and of those suffering from natural disasters. Perhaps, as a race, we have failed to bring about as much relief as we have been capable of. It is a ministry given to us to use the gift of unfolding science to strive to alleviate the sufferings of mankind (and other animals as well). I believe that the image of God in us drives us to overcome our “idolatry of self” and to strive for a unity of heart

Ruins of a 6th-century Byzantine hospital in Side, Turkey, containing five large rooms for patients.



among all humanity. Medical science and technology have given us a vehicle to express that striving toward unity that God calls us to embrace through the Holy Spirit.

History reveals to us human failures and idolatries, but also humankind's triumphs and (slow, often halting, sometimes arrogant) strivings toward a true concept of humanity and its unity. We have at least become concerned with the sufferings of others, of the different tribes and "races," and have realized that there is a single, common human nature shared by all and subject to the laws of nature. Orthodox Christianity has defined for us that everyone within this common nature is a unique "hypostasis" responsible for our own actions and attitudes but also responsible to the whole body of humanity and for our custodianship of the earth. The individual is responsible to the whole. Human nature really is the sum of its parts, and the individual can in no way separate herself or himself from the whole. The more we comprehend and act on this knowledge, the less suffering there will be in humanity.

This brings me to a certain understanding of what the passions and the holy mystery of confession are truly about. The word passion does not mean sin; it means suffering. In fact, the real problem for Christians is not sin, but alienation and inner human suffering. Sin is simply the main symptom of our condition. Because the Church is a spiritual hospital and not a court of law, confession should not be seen as an avenue

for punishment, but as a vehicle for the spiritual healing of inner human suffering. The clergy are not supposed to be prosecuting attorneys, but rather spiritual healers.

When we hear confessions, we should be more interested in the inner suffering of the persons whose confession we are hearing than in a recitation of "sins." In my view, we should never begin confession by asking "What sins do you have to confess?" but rather, "What is causing you grief or burdening your soul?" People do not sin because they are wicked, but often because they are driven by their inner human suffering—that is, by passions. Sin may be an external manifestation of that inner suffering. The Orthodox Church places such a great emphasis on our struggle with the passions, not as some kind of punishment for sin, but for the healing of the suffering that all humans endure mentally and emotionally. Confession should be part of the healing process of the Church, in which we seek to help people find solutions rather than burden them with guilt. We should be careful not to add to the pain that already exists. If a person is guilty of something, then certainly they should feel guilt until they repent, but repentance is never enough to actually heal the root of the mental and emotional suffering that drives so much about our negative external actions. Co-suffering love is the great healer.

Our primary mission is not to justify suffering, but to alleviate it. This should be seen as a fundamental ministry of the Church. ✽

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