

God and Man, Part One

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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