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Крок назад у майбутнє: практика самітництва американських ченців та православна християнська теологія психофізичного зцілення

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Автор цієї статті розглядає явище самітництва ченців, яке практикується серед різних релігійних груп Заходу та Сполучених Штатів Америки з точки зору православної церкви. Зокрема, описується реакція сучасного православного християнства на це явище західної культури, а також особлива увага приділяється діяльності о. Мелетія Веббера, аббата монастиря Св. Іоанна з Сан-Франциско, що у Ментоні, штат Каліфорнія і його праці про самітництво, що вийшла 2010 р. під назвою «Лікарю, зцілися сам».

Автор порівнює самітництво ченців у православ'ї та в інших релігійних традиціях, зокрема католицькій. Стаття описує теологічні основи, які впливають на практику такого самітництва у православ'ї й порівнює православну теологію та практику психофізичного зцілення з цілями і практикою сучасної західної професійної психотерапії.

До конкретних прикладів, що сприяють нашому дослідженню належать деякі практики, які використовує православна церква у процесі самітництва ченців (молитва і богослужіння, піст, мовчання та молитва про себе, сповідь і причастя, громадські проповіді і визнання обмеженості людських можливостей) на противагу аналогічній католицькій практиці і практиці західної психотерапії (релаксація, діста, драматургія та мистецтво, тиша, діалог, ораторське мистецтво і позитивна дезінтеграція).

У цих прикладах відображається мета православ'я – співпраця та об'єднання розуму, душі і тіла, яких також дотримується теологія психофізичного зцілення. Це сприяє обговоренню ролі і цілей православного монастиря та православного християнства у сучасному західному суспільстві Сполучених Штатів.

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A Step Back to the Future: The American Monastic Retreat and the Orthodox Christian Theology of Psychophysical Healing

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The monastic retreat is a common phenomenon among various religious groups in the United States of America. This paper examines the response of contemporary Orthodox Christianity to this phenomenon, focusing on the work of Fr. Meletios Webber, abbot of the St. John of San Francisco Monastery in Manton, California, and his 2010 retreat entitled "Physician Heal Thyself." It will draw comparisons between the Orthodox monastic retreat and that of other religious traditions, especially the Catholic. It will explore the theological underpinnings that influence the practice of these retreats within the Orthodox realm, and in doing so will compare this Orthodox theology and practice of psychophysical healing with the goals and the practice of modern Western professional psychotherapy. This will lead to a consideration of the roles and goal of Orthodox Christianity within the realm of contemporary Western society.

Keywords – Orthodox Christianity, monastic retreat, theology, psychophysical healing, American spirituality.

I. Introduction

Growing up in San Francisco, California, my family and I would make frequent visits to a nearby Orthodox Christian monastery. I remember its abbot saying that the community work in which he led the monastery was a work of healing, and more specifically of psychotherapy. Though at the time I did not fully understand what he meant, this comment was something that left a lasting impression on me. This abbot's successor, Archimandrite Meletios, seeks to lead the monastery along a similar path. He has led myriad talks and retreats, both at the Monastery of St. John and elsewhere.

This paper will examine how Orthodox Christian monasticism in the United States is responding to the monastic retreat's increasing popularity, across all religions (especially the given example of Catholicism). In this developing context, Orthodox monastic communities strive to find a unique mission in line with both the Orthodox traditions and the current state of their surrounding local communities. All of these Orthodox monastic communities are basing their developing

practice on the same, traditional Orthodox theology, using monastic practice toward the Orthodox mission of healing. My example is original research on the work of Archimandrite (and abbot) Meletios Webber at the John of San Francisco Monastery in Manton, California.

II. Fr. Meletios Webber

Born in London, UK, Fr. Meletios studied theology at Oxford and the Thessalonica School of Theology, and psychotherapy at the University of Montana, connecting theology and healing. He has worked, taught, and lived as a monk in Europe and the USA, and written widely on Orthodox Spirituality [1].

In his writing, talks, and retreats, Fr. Webber strives to reach his 21st century, Western community, and include Orthodox tradition within the contemporary culture. Coming from his rather unique perspective as a theologian, psychotherapist, and recovering alcoholic [2], he has published the book *Steps of Transformation*, which reaches out to the Western community – commenting on the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous from the viewpoint of Orthodox patristic tradition. In this traditional Orthodox sense, with a contemporary Western perspective, he emphasizes that substance abuse is one sign of a greater, universal, internal addiction that all people need to examine.

One can often see this willingness to meet people where they are in Fr. Meletios' approach. It is something typical to the monastic retreat, and something that the people it caters to need. Struggling to retreat from their chaotic lives, they want the tradition, but in a digestible form. Such needs are met in his discussions and retreats – a mix of practical and theoretical, spiritual and secular, local and universal, for the goal of psychophysical healing. This is the way that the Orthodox monastic retreat strives to function in western society.

III. Physician Heal Thyself

I will use personal experience, and notes taken from some monastic retreat lectures lead by Fr. Meletios Webber – primarily his 2010 retreat “Physician Heal Thyself” at the Orthodox Monastery of Saint John – to discuss explore how the Orthodox monastic retreat seeks to operate as a multifaceted tool for psychophysical healing, offering elements common to contemporary monastic retreats and/or contemporary psychotherapy, while including elements unique to its historical tradition.

Rest is a typical element of any contemporary monastic retreat, and psychophysically and theologically necessary. De-stressing time is one of the key reasons lay people come to any monastery. As one American Catholic monastery retreat participant said, “I come screaming in off the runway [...] This cools my jets,” and a monk at the same monastery agrees: “People come here and think they're supposed to sit in chapel all the time [...] You're trying too hard; that's spiritual constipation.” [3]. The Orthodox Monastery of St. John encourages rest. Pine trees stretch for acres and acres, a small meandering brook borders the guesthouse. In the free time provided, as a retreat participant roams the grounds, or sits and

thinks, reads, or prays, she can watch dogs and cats playing, hear goats bleating and hummingbirds chirping. And she sleeps. Or she may also assist the monks in their steady labors – cooking, dipping beeswax candles, etc.

Contemporary psychotherapy also appreciates the value of rest. Rest is not only important as stress relief, but also in the psychotherapeutic process. In so-called body psychotherapy, the therapist often uses techniques such as massages or lying down, relaxing the patient for maximal therapy benefit [4], promoting the patient's experiential awareness of the psychophysical nature of her emotional problems. The traditional, theological, psychophysical therapy of the Orthodox monastery also depends on rest, maintaining that “[w]hen a man is inwardly healed, he has no psychological problems. He lives in [...] blessed and undisturbed peace [...] with the reservation that the body, of course, can be made sick by fatigue, exhaustion, weakening, and decay” [5]. To the Orthodox, true and permanent psychophysical healing must involve not only the mind but also the body.

The monastic retreat is supposed to be a healing fast. In Catholic retreats, the participants receives “simple meals like baked beans” as part of a search to ““peel off the accessories”” and ““figure out what to do with [her] life”” [6], and holds true for Orthodox retreats (such as “Physician Heal Thyself”) which often take place during fasting periods such as the Great Lent (before Easter) and the Nativity Fast. Traditionally, the Orthodox monk from meat every day, and from dairy products on Wednesdays and Friday, and in a fast period this only escalates. Retreat participants (who are able and willing) follow this diet, so going to an Orthodox monastery, especially during Great Lent, is a culinary change of pace. Especially for those living in the so-called fast food nation: the United States is 5 percent of the world population, consuming 15 percent of the world's meat [7]. Since not all people can have the same diet as the Monastery of St. John's monks, breakfast and/or lunch are often informal [8], giving visitors some leeway on eating time and habits.

In the Orthodox approach, fasting is an integral part of psychophysical healing that gets the body, mind, and soul in touch, and brings the human being together with her human and natural environment. Fasting is a part of a *praxis* leading toward psychophysical unity, along with prayer and almsgiving. It is supposed to make the prayer and almsgiving easier: less focus on the body and the mind is supposed to bring them into balance with soul and with others, furthering *theoria* (communion with God; psychophysical healing). Contemporary psychotherapy agrees, maintaining that “improved nutrition can enhance psychological well-being [...] and psychotherapists [...] daily have the opportunity to prescribe exercise and nutrition therapy” [9].

Prayer is also an essential part of this *praxis*. In most American monastic retreats, one is usually not required to attend any of the services, but there can be a lot of them. At the Monastery of St. John there are usually four services a day: Matins, Divine Liturgy, Vespers, and Compline [10]. This is as much as five hours or more of formal prayer a day, though the monks are expected to be

praying throughout the entire day, and visitors are encouraged to do the same. The Orthodox monastery is considered a concentration of psychophysical healing practices, and worship is in a concentrated dose.

Formal Orthodox worship has several aspects intended to promote healing. The services are based on readings of the psalms and the four gospels, and hymns and prayers referencing them. The psalms are seen as the poetic account of the spiritual journey toward psychophysical healing [11], and the gospels have over a hundred references to healing, to be the example for the person struggling toward psychophysical healing.

The Orthodox Liturgy service is intended to be a literary and dramatic reenactment of Jesus' life. Psychotherapy suggests that when "a patient either selects a literary work to discuss or writes his or her own," it can "yield important information about [...] conscious and unconscious issues" [12], and some psychotherapists employ so-called drama therapy to help the client understand her own life-drama. The Orthodox services are similarly designed to bring the soul and body into psychophysical unity. All five senses are engaged: the sight with the iconography, the touch with the kissing of the icons, the ears with the liturgical music, the taste with the Eucharist, the smell with the incense. As mentioned above, body therapy is also an element of contemporary psychotherapy. Some psychotherapists have their clients play and listen to music, create and appreciate artwork, as part of a therapy session or therapy process [13]. In Orthodoxy, the body is involved in both psychophysical ailment and its cure.

Silence is another integral part of the psychophysical healing process at the monastic retreat. The average American is surrounded by noise and sensory overload on a daily basis. The American monastic retreats contrast strongly, and "ask for complete quiet or at least have silent hours," believing that "in silence one can't hide from one's problems, or from God" [14]. The quiet, natural setting of the Monastery of St. John is conducive to silence. Yet this silence is to be not just the peaceful silence of the surrounding, but also the inner silence of the monastic community and its retreat visitors. Breakfast or lunch, or on some days both, are eaten in complete silence, and nearly all of the services begin with 20 minutes of group silent prayer – the Jesus Prayer [15]. This prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me, a sinner"), often called the Prayer of the Heart, is supposed to concentrate the body through silence and breathing, to put the mind in the heart, to bring the mind and the heart together in the body as a complete, healed psychophysical whole. It is part of the Orthodox monastic tradition of *hesychia* (stillness or silence) viewed as integral praxis of psychophysical healing [16]. These methods also concern psychotherapy. According to therapist Dr. Lane, "[m]oments of silence in the therapy hour [...] can communicate important psychodynamic information" and "deeply facilitate the therapeutic encounter" [17]. This is analogous to the Orthodox belief that the Jesus Prayer allows the heart to pray, communicate, and even think instead of the analytical

mind. In both traditions, "meditation can make a significant contribution to the deep transformation of personality sought in psychotherapy" [18].

Confession is an important aspect of Orthodox psychophysical spirituality that may differ from contemporary psychotherapy and the typical monastic retreat of other traditions. It is considered the Orthodox's responsibility to find a permanent and appropriate spiritual father. One confesses to this spiritual father as part of psychophysical healing, since he is supposed to be psychophysically healed, or be in the process, and can thus help in the healing of others. Protestantism usually lacks confession, and while Catholicism also offers confession, it most often provided by someone sitting behind a screen, leaving the layperson little prerogative to choose the confessor, or to develop a lifelong personal relationship. Many people repeatedly come on an Orthodox retreat in part because they consider the abbot a spiritual father, and receive the confession from him, or simply seek counsel and therapy for their lives and psychophysical problems. For example, Fr. Meletios Webber (trained as a secular psychotherapist) is in high demand as confessor. The dialogue between psychotherapist and client and that between father confessor and spiritual disciple readily draw analogy. Yet one difference is that most people see a psychotherapist temporarily, while in Orthodoxy, all are considered psychophysically ill, always in need of a cure – even all father confessors have their own father confessors.

One of the goals of confession and the retreat's communal worship and Liturgy is communion with God (seen as the key to psychophysical healing) – for example, in the Eucharist. Orthodox prayers recited before receiving the Eucharist make it clear that it is intended for "the healing of soul and body." One of them says: "sanctify my soul and body, my mind and heart, my emotions and affections, and wholly renew me" [19]. The healing path of spiritual *praxis* is thus seen as a fixed path ending with Divine Liturgy and the Eucharist (the end to "Physician Heal Thyself").

Giving talks is common in monastic retreats of other traditions as well as in psychotherapy (e.g. the Psychotherapy Lecture Series, designed to "broaden and deepen connections within the community" [20]). The Orthodox precedence for giving talks during retreats is the Bible's Sermon on the Mount, seen as a guide for the *praxis* of psychophysical healing [21]. Fr. Meletios says, "I pretty much always give the same talk, because the message is the same" (the message being spirituality as psychophysical healing). Yet the same people can, and gladly do, come back to hear him, since the Orthodox approach to psychophysical healing is an ongoing process. His basic message is, "I can't; God can," and his goal is to help heal the gaps between humanity and God, humanity and nature, man and woman, the mind and the heart and the body [22]. In other words, his goal is to lose the isolated focus on the mind and ego, and to bring it into harmony with others, including God. Similarly, in the psychotherapeutic counseling that Alcoholics Anonymous

offers against the psychophysical addiction to alcohol, meetings make use of the Serenity Prayer: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference" [23]. This indicates belief that, in order to be healed, one must accept the limitation of the human ego in relationship to its human, natural, and even divine environment. We also find this idea in the psychotherapeutic principle of positive disintegration: when one experiences a nervous breakdown, one falls apart only to be put back together again, better and stronger for the realization of one's human limitations [24]. Yet, despite similarities, Orthodoxy sees psychotherapy as seeking to find the ego, and sees Orthodox psychophysical spirituality as seeking to find it. Orthodoxy sees psychotherapy as extremely useful and often necessary yet as also having the potential for an over-focus on the ego, whereas the goal of Orthodox psychophysical spirituality is losing the ego through synergy with God, nature, and the other.

IV. Conclusion

Contemporary Orthodox monastic retreats integrate tradition with the needs and expectations of their 21st century participants. People who frequent any religious retreat are "taking stock of the past as they swing around to look into the fog of the future" [25], and American Orthodoxy recognizes and should continue recognizing this. The monastic retreat within Orthodox Christianity may be a sort of innovation, but the message remains clearly articulated as traditional. These are some of the main reasons the retreat "Physician Heal Thyself" provides a particularly attractive example, echoing Luke 4.23 to express the Orthodox concept that the soul-mind-body who truly wishes to change, to heal the world, must first heal itself before healing those same diseases in others. Fr. Meletios gathered this particular conference mainly to instruct Church leaders and clerics to heal their own psychophysical disorders in order to help Orthodox and non-Orthodox do the same.

The Orthodox monastery is here fulfilling its traditional role as the source of psychophysical healing strategies – as a sort of hospital, a medical school [26]. If all Orthodox Christian religious networks are intended to heal psychophysical disorders, the Orthodox monastery views itself as the center of a healing network extending to the outside world, striving to promote universal change and healing by example from within its own local territory and society. When nostalgia and fear of change is

endangering religion's present and future, the answer that the Orthodox monastic community seeks for the healing of both the individual and revival of the Orthodox community is blending traditional theology with modern practice: stepping back to the future.

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