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The Last Enemy

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The principal image of the resurrection in the Eastern iconographic tradition is not a depiction of a post-Easter scene found in the Gospels. Nor is it an image of Christ striding forth from a now-empty tomb. Paradoxically, the primary Easter image among the churches of the East is a depiction of Holy Saturday, an image of the secret work of Christ. Christ, already surrounded by the Resurrection light, stands among the dead. Still displaying his wounded hands and feet, Christ is pulling Adam and Eve from their own tombs, holding their wrists as they appear to awaken from a deep slumber. Around Christ are the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, and the figure nearest to Christ is the Baptist, gesturing to the Mighty One. And finally, beneath Christ's feet are two planks, the broken doors of Hades with discarded and useless locks, keys and chains. Suspended in a void and amidst this rubble, this debris of bondage, is the bound figure of Death.

The *anastasis* icon is the whole of the Good News depicted in a single image. Christ has trampled death by his own death and the dead are being drawn to new life. It is a depiction of what we proclaim and celebrate as Christians, and yet, it can seem so foreign to our thinking. The question arises: what can such an image, such a claim mean for the Christian and the world today? Does it not seem entirely too naïve and even irresponsible to preach Christ's resurrection from death and suffering and our very participation in that event? These questions are at the heart of the Church's struggle to re-learn and preach the Good News in the contemporary world.

This short essay will be an exploration into the heart of the Gospel. The particular concern will be to trace a Christian image of death and suffering as well as their defeat in the Resurrection. In order to focus my reflections I will utilize the work of the late Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann. I will begin by presenting three views on death: the religious, the 'this-worldly,' or secular, and the Christian.¹ Following this I will respond to the issue of

¹ The terms 'religious' and 'secular' are types and so are by nature may not accurately explain any particular religion or worldview. As will be shown below, Schmemmann (and I) are more concerned to use the type in order to provide a contrast with Christianity, not to 'attack' any specific group of people. Indeed, Schmemmann frequently alludes to the fact that both types have

suffering and liberation and their relation to death. Finally, I will address the role of liturgy in light of the preceding reflections.

As Alexander Schmemmann notes in the opening lines of *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?*, "in human consciousness the question about religion, about God, about faith, is directly related to the question of death."² This interconnection between faith and the question of death arises from the utter mystery of the reality which lies beyond death. There is no clear evidence, available to us by scientific or other means, whether positive or negative, regarding existence after death. A choice faces us in this mystery. How shall we view death? Death is an inevitability. It is the common experience of every human being and so every human being according to her capacity must answer this question. But any such answer requires a leap of faith; it requires believing in what cannot ultimately be known.

The world offers us two basic responses. The first group, which we will call the religious, argues that death is the natural end of life, and indeed can be felt throughout life in the form of suffering. However, if suffering and death permeate our existence it is only because, on the 'other side' lies our true, immortal existence. This world is full of sorrow and so we must die daily to it so that in the end we may live in the freedom of eternity.

The other camp exists as a rejection of this religious view. Has not the unknown world beyond death stripped *this* world of the here-and-now of its value? In order to preserve the value of the here-and-now the other world must be rejected. But now, with eternity cast aside, how can this world go on having any meaning? Precisely by denying eternity, death has loomed all the larger, only now it is no doorway to be embraced but the inevitable point of destruction for this here-and-now existence. Schmemmann summarizes the two worldviews:

On the one side it seems there is faith in a Creator-God – and at the same time, the rejection of his creation, the thirst to depart from this God-created world; and on

much in common with Christianity and so they often 'blend'.

² Alexander Schmemmann, *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003) 13.

the other side there is an affirmation of the world, yet a world that is horrible in its meaninglessness, for the one who alone has the possibility of using and enjoying this world – man – is in this world an accidental guest, destined for total annihilation.³

Between these two sides we face a terrible choice: abandon this life and embrace the meaning of eternity, or abandon eternity and embrace the meaninglessness of this life.

It is only in contrast to these two views that the Gospel message and the Christian vision of death can be adequately understood. The temptation is to force Christianity into one of the other two categories. Either Christianity is a religion among other religions seeking to prepare us to die well and so live on in an eternal existence, or Christianity is essentially this-worldly and can dispense with all talk of heaven and the afterlife (we shall return to this view of Christianity below). In truth, however, Christianity says something incomprehensible to the wisdom of eternity and the wisdom of the 'here-and-now', for Christianity declares boldly with Paul that, "the last enemy to be destroyed is death..." (1 Cor 15:26). Death, in Christian faith, is no natural end for the human person. It is not to be embraced as an escape from trouble or merely held-off for as long as possible while we do the work of living. Death is an enemy to be defeated, an unnatural figure worthy of our animosity.

Perhaps the most moving testimony of the Christian abhorrence for death is revealed when Christ weeps for Lazarus. Here we do not find the embrace of death that we find in Plato, who says, "those who rightly love wisdom are practicing dying, and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world."⁴ Christ offers no comforting platitudes; he "does not say all those things we do in our pathetic and uncomfoting attempts to console."⁵ Christ becomes "perturbed and deeply troubled," a somewhat innocuous translation for the disturbance Lazarus' death causes him. Indeed, this Gospel story should cause our own discomfort. It is noteworthy that the story appears in John's Gospel where the serenity of Christ so often rivals the serenity of Plato's wise man. But here, in this scene, we find that Christ be-

comes "perturbed" twice, first at the grief of Mary and again before Lazarus' tomb. Christ has, verses earlier, declared "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live," (Jn 11:25) and yet now he stands before Lazarus' tomb weeping.

Christ offers us no teaching on the immortality of the soul and so there is a temptation to think Christianity into a here-and-now worldview. After all, as we have just seen, Christ weeps for Lazarus' death. If Christ preached an afterlife would he not "rejoice" at the liberation of Lazarus' soul? And since he does not, he surely fits into that camp which rejects eternity for this world in which death is a regrettable and natural end. In a certain sense this line of reasoning is admissible, but it ignores the remarkable words spoken by Christ. Yes, Christ offers tears of grief and is disturbed by the death of Lazarus. He offers no words of comfort, but he does offer words of authority: "He cried out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in cloth. So Jesus said to them, 'Untie him and let him go'" (Jn 11: 43-44).

We have in this Gospel scene an anticipation of the great work of Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. Christ's word frees Lazarus from the bonds of death. In the Paschal Mystery, Christ breaks the chains with which Death had bound us, and binds Death in turn. In the very defeat of his suffering and death, in the very midst of the deepest abysses of Hades where God is not praised, Christ has vanquished suffering and Death. In the prayers of the Byzantine liturgy for Holy Saturday we find a clear recognition of the victory won in Christ's death, a verbal expression of the *anastasis* icon,

When thou, immortal Life, didst humble Thyself unto death, through the glory of Thy divinity Thou didst destroy Hades. And when Thou didst raise the dead from the bowels of the earth, all the heavenly powers exclaimed: 'O Christ God, O Giver of life, glory be to Thee!'⁶

And again:

The hosts of angels were amazed and dazzled as they beheld Thee, O Saviour, among the dead, and destroying the power of

³ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, W.H.D. Rouse, trans., Eric H. Warmington and Philip G. Rouse, eds. (New York: Signet Classic, 1984) 470.

⁵ *O Death*, 25.

⁶ *The Byzantine Missal*.

death, and raising up Adam with Thee, and releasing all the souls from Hades.⁷

With the repetition of these prayers characteristic of the Byzantine liturgy, it is appropriate that the psalm recited immediately before the Gospel reading is the psalm 68 (67), a psalm of Yahweh's victory:

Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered: and let them that hate Him flee from before His face.

As smoke vanishes, so let them vanish away; As wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.

And let the just feast and rejoice before God: and be delighted with gladness.⁸

Does this not challenge us? Have we dared to consider ourselves among the just rejoicing in God's victory? It is by no means an easy task to embrace the joy of the Good News, indeed, it so often seems entirely counter-intuitive, irrational, and naïve. Schmemmann puts before us a poignant question, which so accurately captures our own hidden thoughts,

...how can we *not* recognize the lordship of all that has become normal, the rule of life, with which man has long ago come to terms, against which he has ceased even to protest and about which he has ceased even to be concerned in his philosophy, the enemy with which he seeks to find a compromise both in his religion and his culture?⁹

Is this not true? Have we not tired of any protest against death (for it strikes us as utterly futile) and instead seek pathetic compromises? We pray desperately for death to hold off its inevitable triumph over us, but we do not have the strength to defy death. In our more thoughtful moments we may come to recognize that this fear of death, which consists only in a desire to hold off death "a little longer," is itself a dreadful state. And so we seek, in our philosophies and religions, to resolve ourselves for death, to prepare for a fitting death. And yet, as we have seen, the Good News stands against all of this compromise and resolution to death, "for in essence Christianity is not concerned about coming to terms with death, but rather with the victory over it...[if this is not the case], then I repeat, the whole of Christian faith is meaningless, for the apostle Paul said: 'If Christ has

not been raised then...your faith is in vain' (1 Cor 15:14)."¹⁰

Christ's resurrection, the bedrock of our faith, demands much from us. For our faith to prove true we must embrace an incredible joy, a prophetic kind of joy incomparable to the joys offered by the world. Christians must embrace the miraculous joy of Easter, the joy of a world yet to come. Sergius Bulgakov writes,

When the doors are opened, before the Sign of the Cross, and during the singing of the exultant Paschal hymn, we enter into the Church all gleaming with lights, and our hearts are flooded with joy, for Christ is risen from the dead. And then the Paschal miracle is performed in our souls. For we 'see the Resurrection of Christ.' 'Having purified our senses,' we see 'Christ shining,'... then we forget where we are, we pass out of ourselves, time stops, and we enter the 'Sabbath rest of the People of God' (Hebrews 4:9-10). In the radiance of the white light of Easter, earthly colors are dimmed, and the soul sees only the 'unapproachable light of the Resurrection'; 'now all things are filled with light, heaven and earth and hell.' On Easter night it is given to man to experience in advance the life of the age to come, to enter into the Kingdom of Glory, the Kingdom of God.¹¹

There is always the danger, of course, that such Good News collapses into a "honey-sweet" message, which preaches a blind optimism, a consolation to (or an avoidance of) death and suffering. It is especially in the contemporary world, with humanity stratified between the seemingly powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed, that such Good News serves only to maintain the status quo. It can appear from such a view that "classical" Christianity, the Gospel of Christ's Resurrection, is another religion like all others. It offers only another escape, another consolation to the tears and toils of life by focusing our attention on a mythical heaven where there are no such toils and all tears shall be wiped away.

⁷ *Ibid.* It is noteworthy that many iconographic depictions of the *anastasis* include the angelic host following Christ into Hades.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *O Death*, 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ Sergius Bulgakov, "Meditations on the Joy of the Resurrection," in *Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Russian Thought*, Alexander Schmemmann, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965) 299-300.

There is a legitimate rejection of this kind of Christianity which offers only cheap consolation. However, there is a profound mistake in such “demythologizing”, because in so doing one has constructed another kind of religion one which offers its own view of death and its own cheap consolations. Schmemmann writes,

[Secularism] is, in fact, itself a religion, and as such, an explanation of death and a reconciliation with it. It is the religion of those who have tired of having the world explained in terms of an ‘other world’ of which no one knows anything...Secularism is an ‘explanation’ of death in terms of life...Life ends with death. This is unpleasant, but since it is natural, since death is a universal phenomenon, the best thing man can do about it is simply to accept it as something natural. As long as he lives, however, he need not think about it, but should live as though death did not exist.¹²

In the end it appears that the secular, this-worldly, view is itself a religion. Good health, the sustaining of this life (because there is nothing else) and the avoidance of death are the central goals. Disease and decay are combated with medicine and other treatments for as long as possible. Hospitals attest to the power and success of this worldview, but betray its weakness in the manner in which death, a common hospital occurrence, is an anaesthetized affair. Death is the unfortunate limit of all healing and must be hidden from society. Our elderly are put in nursing homes away from the healthy and youthful. Our funeral homes appear like houses, all in an effort to hide and domesticate death.

In politics and economics as in health care, the secular encourages combat against the forces of suffering. However, precisely in a demythologized worldview, there arises a new class of mythic heroes who defy death and suffering in their work for “the future” or “the cause”. In her commentary on letters of political prisoners and their parallels with Jesus’ farewell discourse in John’s Gospel, Dorothee Soelle finds a common thread. She writes, “In their letters appears an almost painful sense of self-confidence, the superiority of those who die for a just cause... They know their lives will conquer the death of being forgotten.”¹³ Soelle, however, can find no place

for the senseless and fruitless suffering of innocents. Without a cause for which to suffer, suffering has no meaning.

Soelle offers an incredibly powerful vision of Christianity stripped of its “mythical heavens,” which is now able to work for the relief of suffering. It is precisely by rejecting Christ’s defeat of death, and the immortal life offered therein, however, that Christianity is left impotent. Any vision of suffering constructed solely from the resources of this world inevitably leaves a portion of humanity outside “liberation”. Inevitably there will be those who cannot suffer and die for a cause. There will be those who cannot look back on a life well lived, and in their moment of death or their life of suffering, what Good News can we offer? How can their sufferings find meaning? What future can the dying and the dead work for when they no longer have the strength to work? It is precisely here that Christianity can and must preach the Good News. Christianity must retain for itself a message which can be spoken to those who suffer senselessly, for those who cannot “overcome” their suffering in the name of a cause. Christianity rejects the liberation of the majority at the expense of the minority. Christianity rejects the vision of a human utopia temporally out of reach for the weak and powerless. Christianity rejects the apparent sufficiency of a society which claims to be “mostly just”. Schmemmann writes,

...to live in a cosmic cemetery and to ‘dispose’ every day of thousands of corpses and to get excited about a ‘just society’ and to be happy! – this is the fall of man. It is not the immorality or the crimes of man that reveal him as a fallen being; it is his ‘positive ideal’ – religious or secular – and his satisfaction with his ideal.¹⁴

Christianity embraces the message of liberation, but Christianity’s vision of liberation extends further than the world can conceive. It extends beyond the living to embrace the dead and the dying. We Christians do not bring a message primarily of *help* to the world. We bring a message of hope to a hopeless world.

It is particularly in the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick that Schmemmann sees the remarkable difference between Christianity and all forms of help and therapy. For Schmemmann, Christian anointing is not primarily a remedy for disease;

¹² *Ibid.*, 96-97.

¹³ Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 137-138.

¹⁴ *O Death*, 100.

if that were the case we would rightly forgo anointing and simply hope in medicine. For Schmemmann, anointing is a passage, an entrance into the life of the resurrected Christ. When we anoint we make the sick into a “martyr, a witness to Christ in his very suffering.”¹⁵ The anointed ones, in the midst of pain and travail, witness to the Life of Christ for they have already entered the Kingdom. Their lives have passed over into a realm where death and suffering have no power. It is the supreme paradox of Christian faith that Christ’s victory and our deliverance are won in the midst of Hades. The Kingdom of God erupts in the Kingdom of death.

It is Schmemmann’s great theme that this entry into the Kingdom is the very nature of liturgy, prayer and the sacraments in general. He writes, “The whole Liturgy is to be seen as the sacrament of the Kingdom of God, the Church is to be seen as the presence and communion of the Kingdom that is to come...”¹⁶ And it is this insight that offers Christians the means by which to confront the oppression and injustice of the world. Schmemmann writes, “[The Eucharistic celebration] is the ascension of the Church to the place where she belongs *in statu patriae*. It is also her subsequent return to this world: her return with power to preach the Kingdom of God.”¹⁷ The Christian shares in the “divine, holy, pure, immortal, heavenly, life-giving mysteries,” and with a life already in communion with the eschatological Kingdom, can reject

the Kingdom of death in the world. We are given the power to oppose all bonds of slavery, for our bonds have been broken. There is no guarantee that we will not suffer, but by the power of the Risen



Christ, who has made death his royal highway, our sufferings may be our crowns of glory. Christ’s tomb has become the “fount of the Resurrection, a giver of life more splendid than Paradise, and more radiant than any royal chamber.”¹⁸ The Cross of his passion has become his staff of victory. And so, in our power or in our powerlessness we are made into martyrs, icons of the Risen Christ. Though we die, it is our great joy that Christ has trampled death by death. It is we who have been lifted from the tombs in the *anastasis*. It is we whose bonds have been broken. It is we who now join in the Easter salutation of the Christian East and proclaim to the world our unending joy: “Christ is Risen! Indeed He Is Risen!”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶ Alexander Schmemmann, “Liturgy and Eschatology,” in *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990) 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

¹⁸ *Byzantine Missal*.