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NOTHING NEW IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

Albrecht Nyce, OSB

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NIV)

“Speak a word, Abba.” I wonder if the above quoted fragment of wisdom from Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) was ever a response from a desert amma or abba (mother or father) to such a request from a seeker. Evagrius, in the *Antirrhētikos*, draws from other verses of Qoheleth so it appears plausible that this verse could have been uttered by a desert mother or father. To extend the hypothetical a bit more, perhaps the seeker, anxious about what she perceived to be a sudden, life-changing, personal crisis, travels to the desert to the noted Abba, and receives this verse to take home and mull over. The question of relevance to the charge of this essay is, would the spiritual advice of today, or the multiple manners in which it was given, differ significantly from what was the case in either Greco-Roman antiquity or the era of the desert mothers and fathers? In line with Qoheleth, I suggest it does not differ in a significant fashion. This is not to say there are no differences of import, but I contend they are secondary and are connected to societal and cultural contexts. What is the evidence in support of this thesis?

First, and perhaps foundational, the time scale under consideration - about 2500 years (Greco-Roman antiquity to

the present day) - is simply insufficient for the emergence of any significant evolutionary change in human nature. Despite vast changes in culture, society, and technology, we are still the same pattern-seeking and meaning-seeking *Homo sapiens* that we can find in ancient Athens and Jerusalem. Primary evidence for this is the continuing presence and relevance of ancient philosophical and religious thought in the academy, and in the lives of many billions of people under the sun. Beyond this underlying reason, several historical facts support the contention of little significant change. A little historical excursion is in order.

Issetraut Hadot delineates three general models for the spiritual guide in Greco-Roman antiquity: 1) educator, musician, and poet; 2) legislator, sage, statesman, or king; and 3) philosopher (I. Hadot, *The Spiritual Guide*, 436). To delve into these in detail is beyond the scope of this essay but the reader should take note of the many disciplines or professions of the spiritual guides contained in the models listed above. The third general model noted by I. Hadot is that of philosopher. The Athenian cradle of the philosophical schools in the fourth and third centuries BCE produced spiritual guides whose primary goals were to educate citizens and thereby enable a happy life. I. Hadot writes, “Ancient philosophy was, above all, help with life’s problems and spiritual guidance, and the ancient philosopher was, above all, a spiritual guide” (I. Hadot, 444). The philosopher as spiritual guide not only sought to impart “knowledge as *habitus*, the transformation of the individual through knowledge” (I. Hadot, 452) but also “[lead] the student to the recognition of his faults, that is, to critical self-analysis” (I. Hadot, 453). These goals of spiritual direction were then adopted and adapted by the Hellenized Christian monks in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, followed by subsequent developments in monasticism after the fourth century CE, the development of the Ignatian program

of spiritual exercises in the 16th century CE, and the practice of confession (I. Hadot, 455).

Pierre (the other) Hadot sees the strong coupling of philosophical and Christian spirituality. He states, “...ever since the first centuries of the church’s existence, Christian spirituality has been the heir of ancient philosophy and its spiritual practices” (P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 127). Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and the Cappadocian Fathers all contributed to the philosophizing of Christianity, building on the work of Philo of Alexandria for the Jewish tradition (P. Hadot, 128-9). As in philosophy, this kind of Christianity represented *a way of life*. This came to be embodied in the spiritual guidance of the desert mothers and fathers that we see in the *Apophthegmata*, from Antony to Dorotheus of Gaza (P. Hadot, 131-133).

The *Apophthegmata* (Sayings) show a practical focus, addressing common problems and vices in the lives of seekers and not theological or intellectual concerns (C. Stewart, *The Desert Fathers on Radical Self-Honesty*, 7). As in the case of the philosophical spiritual guides, the desert monks were also looking for critical self-analysis, but not *too* critical! It is a “self-awareness rather than modern self-consciousness” (C. Stewart, 10). The elder (amma or abba) was there in the role of an “encourager” or “witness” or “midwife” to the seeker, parting with a “word” but not doing the heavy lifting – that is the role of the seeker (C. Stewart, 21). It is important to note the role of the abba or amma of the desert. Sister Benedicta Ward, S.L.G. states, “The abba did not give ‘spiritual direction’; if asked, he would give ‘a word’ which would become a sacrament to the hearer. The action of God was paramount and the only point of such ‘words’ was to free the disciple to be led by the Spirit of God...the real guide was the Holy Spirit.” (My limited

personal experience with spiritual direction (accompaniment) today is that too many ‘words’ *are* uttered by the elder!) The ammas and abbas of the desert were typically not well-lettered or intellectually oriented (the exception being the Egyptian centers of Nitria and Scetis where a more learned group of Greek-influenced monks lived, among them Evagrius of Pontus). They, the ammas and abbas, (I keep wanting to write ‘mamas’ and ‘papas’!) were also typically not ordained (certainly not the ammas!) or part of an organized hierarchy (C. Stewart, 44-5). This situation changed over time as the era of the desert monks drew to a close and monasticism solidified under Benedict and the Church institutionalized into Christendom. What came with this was structure and a “differentiation of roles”, “ordained ministry”, emphasis on “sin” and “sacramental confession” (C. Stewart, *ibid*). Sacramental confession, for those churches that offer this tradition, is still a present-day reality that has a positive, if limited, spiritual guidance role. Recall the caution of Dorotheus of Gaza concerning self-direction: “Nothing is more burdensome than directing oneself; nothing is more fatal.” We self-deceive so easily (C. Stewart, 15). My personal experience (set aside the ‘words’ issue alluded to above!) as a Christian for many years in a church without a sacramental confession tradition is that one needs to work very hard to avoid self-deception. I can thus answer in the affirmative C. Stewart’s question, “is there something about sharing the secrets of one’s heart with another person, lay or clerical, which liberates in a way that solitary confession in prayer does not?” (C. Stewart, 44). (I am reminded of a scientific version of this precautionary stance with regard to theory-building by the American Physics Nobel laureate, Richard Feynman, “The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest one to fool.”)

There exists today a wide variety of spiritual direction/accompaniment options that involve professionals who have obtained

considerable educational background and certification, and attained competence in the provision of spiritual guidance. Sacramental confession aside, I too see the benefit for all Christians of any type, of “the growth in this area [spiritual direction]...that...has helped to break the identification of spiritual guidance with ordained ministry” (C. Stewart, 45). This is certainly the case today...much like the “anti-structure of the desert” (C. Stewart, 44). We see “spiritual” self-help groups of all types, addressing the complexities of modern living, but perhaps such complexity was abundant 2500 years ago, only in different forms, differing manifestations.

What has been will be again...

C. Stewart opines, “Although the stream which flowed from the desert has gone underground and has divided many times, it still flows” (C. Stewart, 46).

What has been done will be done again...

In conclusion, are we to grant the point made by the sage of Qoheleth quoted at the start? That is, the fundamentals of spiritual guidance have remained the same from their implementations in ancient Greece and the Christianized versions of the desert mothers and fathers through the present day? I believe this is a reasonable conclusion. I. Hadot cleverly betrays the same conclusion by way of a provocative question in the last paragraph of her article, “The Spiritual Guide,” “Has modern spiritual guidance or contemporary psychology, which is so proud of its scientific researches, brought the slightest advance over the millennia-old practice of spiritual guidance?” Qoheleth answers -

There is nothing new under the sun...

Notes

1. Evagrius of Pontus, *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, tr. David Brakke (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 2009).
2. Hsetraut Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 436-455.
3. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 127.
4. Columba Stewart, "The Desert Fathers on Radical Self-Honesty," *Vox Benedictina* 8/1 (1991): 6-53.
5. See <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/24Ward.pdf> Published in The Way, volume 24, no. 1, January 1984, 61-70.
6. Ward, Benedicta. "Foreward," *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Edition* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), xviii.
7. Richard P. Feynman, *Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman!* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1985), 343.
8. Ever the nerd, I might add that if one sufficiently broadens the scope in time and space, you will encounter "new things." The late science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler has written a poem part of which has become a science-based meme found on mugs, etc. "There's nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns."