

Orthodox Christianity and Ethics

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Article from OED Book / October 7, 1995

According to SVS "oral tradition" Fr Georges Florovsky would begin his lectures in Christian Ethics with the sentence: "For Orthodox Christians there is no such thing as Christian Ethics." Having hopefully caught the attention of his students with this opening, he would proceed to make his points.

Fr Florovsky claimed, we are told, that human behavior is rooted in a person's relationship with God. Human beings act according to their personal knowledge, faith, experience, maturity, conditions, commitment and community - for all of which they become, at some point, fully responsible.

Ethical behavior, in this perspective, is never simply the application of formal principles or rules. Orthodox Christians accept certain rules of behavior as normative and binding not because they consider them as universally applicable to human beings regardless of their beliefs and conditions, but because they believe them to be commanded by the living God who acts in their lives and to whom they are indebted and responsible. And since Christians are factually in different stages of belief, understanding, commitment and spiritual growth, their behavior will differ in different times and conditions (see Lk 12:47-48, Jn 13:17, Rom 2, Jas 4:17). A Covenant Relationship

Although Christian ethics in this understanding is not a system of morality based on principles to which all reasonable, good-willed adults should voluntarily assent, a conviction that all human beings are made in God's image and have God's law "written on their hearts" (see Rom 2). But, as Dostoevsky strongly testifies, the chances for widespread agreement on such natural foundations, given human freedom, passion and sin, are virtually non-existent; and a compelling case might be made that if there is no God and eternal life, it is reasonable for people to do whatever they want - even to steal, murder and rape - since nothing ultimately matters and all passes into oblivion.

Be that as it may (and secular humanists and atheistic naturalists may discuss it as they please), the claim here is that Christian ethics arises out of the "ethos" of a community of people who claim a special covenant relationship with God.

Faithful members of the Old Covenant, for example, did not understand themselves as bound by the Ten Commandments as a set of moral principles universally applicable to all human beings. They rather believed that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had demonstrated His "covenant love" (hesed, eleos) by delivering them from slavery in Egypt and had given them laws of ethical (and liturgical) behavior which they were obliged to obey in return for His saving action. The Lord, as it were, said to His People, "I brought you out of Egypt and made you My Own. You are indebted to me for your very existence. Therefore you will keep my commandments as the sign of your gratitude and love."

In similar fashion, Christians do not strive to live according to the Sermon on the Mount because they see it as an ethical code for all people. Christians rather consider themselves obliged to follow the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels because they believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God who was crucified and raised from the dead for their salvation. They find themselves by faith in a New Covenant with God the Father through Christ and the Holy Spirit. And this New Covenant, like the Old, has obligations for its members which express what the apostle Paul calls (among other things) "the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2) and "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2); what the Letter of James paradoxically calls "the perfect law, the law of liberty" (Jas 1:25, 2:12). The Lord now, as it were, says to His People: "I have saved you by grace by sending my Son and my Spirit. You are indebted to me for life everlasting. You will therefore keep Christ's commandments as the sign of your gratitude and love." A Response of Love to Love

Christian ethics is ultimately therefore the response of human love to divine love. God loves first, and believers love in return, the perfect expression of which is to do God's will and to keep His commandments. The faithful behave as they believe God wants them to behave, convinced that this is not only the proper expression of their belonging to God, but that it is also in their own best interests because God is good and cares about them, and "his commandment is eternal life" (Jn 12:59).

If you love me, you will keep my commandments," says Jesus (Jn 14:15). "You are my friends, if you do what I command you" (Jn 15:14). To which the First Letter of John adds, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 Jn 5:2-3). A Course in Ethics

Why then do our seminaries have courses in Christian Ethics and Moral Theology? And why should we spend time on Orthodox Education Day discussing ethical issues in various areas of human life and work? SVS "oral tradition" does not give us Fr Florovsky's answer to these questions. But for us the answer is clear.

We at the seminary believe that, as in the past even more so today, Orthodox Christians are obliged to reflect together

on what love for God in Christ and the Holy Spirit requires of believers. We are called to consider in common what God commands each one of us to do. We are especially obliged to do this in respect to specific issues, such as those involving nations and lands, properties and possessions, goods and services, sickness and health, life and death, sexuality and family life, and the use of money, resources and power, which in recent years have become extremely complicated due to social, political, economic, scientific, technological, and legal changes and developments.

To take counsel together is not new. It was always required, and was always done by the faithful, humble and wise. The Bible itself is a witness to common agreements among believers about the behavior expected from those who partake of God's mercy, especially those bought by the blood of Christ. The writings of the saints are filled with advice about the practical activities of the faithful, often in the most specific cases and instances.

In order to act properly Orthodox Christians must confer with each other in Christ's name, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, with the instruction and inspiration of the Church's canonized scriptures and saints. For this reason courses are designed and conferences convened. To this end books are written and seminaries supported. For this purpose we have our discussions this year at OED.

So He led forth his people with joy, his chosen ones singing ... to the end that they should keep his statutes, and observe his laws. Praise the Lord! (Ps 105:43-45). Fr Thomas Hopko
giving Keynote Address at
Orthodox Education Day 1998