

Julia Konstantinovsky – Evagrius Ponticus on the True Personhood in God

“Christianity is the doctrine of our Saviour Jesus Christ, composed of practical virtue (*praktike*), natural contemplation (*fusike*), and theology (*theologia*)”. (*Practicus* 1).

I. Simple practical virtue: the *Praktike*

Practical guidance on virtuous living for the beginners: note the metaphors of warfare, the soldier’s courage in battle, and detachment from things.

Advice on diet, wealth and poverty, and clothes:

“Such is the solitary. ...He must be a soldier of Christ, detached from material things, free from cares and not involved in any trade or commerce; for, as the Apostle says, ‘In order to please the leader who has chosen him, the soldier going to war does not entangle himself in the affairs of this world’ (2 Tim. 2: 4). Let the monk follow this course, especially since he has renounced the materiality of this world in order to win the blessings of stillness (*hesychia*). For the practice of stillness is full of joy and beauty...

“Keep to a sparse and plain diet, not seeking a variety of tempting dishes.

“...Be careful, then, and do not desire wealth for giving to the poor. For this is another trick of the demon, who often arouses self-esteem and fills your intellect with worry and restlessness...

“With regard to clothes, be content with what is sufficient for the needs of the body...If you need food or clothes, do not be ashamed to accept what others offer you. ...But if you have more than you require, give to those in need. It is in this way that God wishes His children to manage their affairs” (*Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness in the Solitary Life*, *The Philokalia*, v. 1, pp. 31-2).

On battling against evil thoughts and impulses:

“Man cannot drive away impassioned thoughts unless he watches over his desire and incensive power/anger. He destroys desire through fasting, vigils and sleeping on the ground, and he tames his anger through long-suffering, forbearance, forgiveness and acts of compassion. For with these two passions are connected almost all the demonic thoughts which lead the intellect to disaster and perdition. It is impossible to overcome these passions unless we can rise above attachment to food and possessions, to self-esteem and even to our very body, because it is through the body that the demons often attempt to attack us...” (*Texts on Discrimination In respect of Passions and Thoughts*, ch. 3, in *The Philokalia*, v. 1, p. 39).

More on battling against evil thoughts:

“Sometimes thoughts are cut off, and sometimes they do the cutting off. Evil thoughts cut off good thoughts, and in turn are cut off by good thoughts. The Holy Spirit therefore notes to which thought we give priority and condemns or approves us accordingly. What I mean is something like this: the thought occurs to me to give hospitality and it is for the Lord’s sake; but when the tempter attacks, this thought is cut off and in its place he suggests giving hospitality for the sake of display. Again, the thought comes to me of giving hospitality so as to appear hospitable in the eyes of others. But this thought in its turn is cut off when a better thought comes, which leads me to practise this virtue for the Lord's sake and not so as to gain esteem from men”. (*Texts on Discrimination In respect of Passions and Thoughts*, chs. 6, in *The Philokalia*, v. 1, p. 42).

*More on the battle against evil thoughts and the cultivation of good and beneficial ones:

*“The Lord entrusted the concepts of this age to man as a kind of sheep to a good shepherd. (cf. John 10)... To help him, He joined to him the angry part and the desirous part, so that with the former he would put to flight the representations that are from the wolves, and with the latter he would cherish the sheep...” (*On the Thoughts*, 17).

*“Suppose, for instance, that a thought full of avarice is suggested to you. Distinguish between the component elements: the intellect, which has accepted the thought, the intellection of gold, gold itself, and the passion of avarice. Then ask: in which of these does the mistake/sin consist? Is it the intellect? But how then can the intellect be the image of God? Is it the intellection of gold? But what sensible person would ever say that? Then is gold itself the sin? In that case, why was it created? It follows, then, that the cause of the sin is the fourth element, which is neither an objective reality, nor the intellection of something real, but is a certain noxious pleasure which, once it is freely chosen, compels the intellect to misuse what God has created. It is this pleasure that the law of God commands us to cut off” (*Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts*, 18, in *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p. 50).

II. Dispassion (*apatheia*) and Contemplation of the universe (*theoria*)

The universe as God's book:

“The contemplation of the embodied and bodiless beings is the book of God, in which the pure mind comes to be written through knowledge. And in this book both the principles/*logoi* of providence and of judgement are written, through which book God is known as creator, wise, provident and judge. He is the creator on account of the things that have come from non-being into being; wise through the *logoi* hidden in them; provident through the things contributing toward our virtue and knowledge; and moreover judge through differing bodies of rational beings, the diversified worlds and the ages that comprise them.” (Scholion 8 on Psalm 138.16).

III. The knowledge of God, *theologia*, and the prayer of light

Knowledge of God through the prayer of light (cf. *On Prayer*, in *The Philokalia*, v. 1, pp. 57 ff.):

Ch. 3. Prayer is communion of the intellect with God. What state, then, does the intellect need so that it can reach out to its Lord without deflection and commune with Him without intermediary?

Ch. 4. When Moses tried to draw near to the burning bush he was forbidden to approach until he had loosed his sandals from his feet (cf. Exod. 3: 5). If, then, you wish to behold and commune with Him who is beyond sense perception and beyond concept, you must free yourself from every impassioned thought.

Ch. 14. Prayer is the flower of gentleness and of freedom from anger.

Ch. 15. Prayer is the fruit of joy and thankfulness.

Ch. 16. Prayer is the remedy for gloom and despondency.

*Ch. 52. We practise the virtues in order to achieve contemplation of the inner essences (*logoi*) of created things, and from this we pass to contemplation of the Logos who gives them their being; and He manifests Himself when we are in the state of prayer.

*61. If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.

Evagrius's theology of light (from *Skemmata*):

“If one wishes to see the state of one's own mind - let him deprive himself of all representations, and then he will see himself similar to sapphire or the colour of the sky. Yet to achieve this without dispassion is impossible, for one needs the assistance of God, who breathes into him the kindred light.” (*Skemmata* 2).

“The state of the intellect is a noetic peak comparable in colour to the sky. The light of the Holy Trinity comes upon it at the hour of prayer.” (*Skemmata* 4).

“Just as light, when it reveals all things to us, has no need of another light through which it will be seen, so also God, when He reveals all things, has no need of another light through which He will be known. In His essence God is light” (The *Gnostic Chapters* I.35).