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BODY AND MATTER IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

The origin of this paper is to be found in a question which I was asked sometime ago, as to whether someone who is deprived of a conscious psychological life, a mentally deficient person for instance, can have a life in God. It was this question which led me to give more thought to the problem of the body and the problem of the spirit, and their relationship with God.

Now I would like to draw your attention to the fact that when we speak of our spiritual life we almost always, unless we are very careful, think of the psychological side of our nature. We speak of our spiritual life in terms of our conscious knowledge of God, of our emotional response in the ray of light which we call our consciousness. This, however, is a very limited field. We know from psychology, not only modern but ancient, that there is a whole world of twilight and darkness. Twilight, out of which things emerge and into which things disappear; our memories, things we can remember now, which are vivid at first but which later fade away. There is also that world which has been studied deeply, and which needs to be discovered even more deeply, the unconscious life of man.

But apart from this, we must remember that man is not simply a soul or a consciousness. The total man is a being made of body and soul together and it is only in the togetherness of both that man is complete. It is certainly Orthodox teaching that the fullness of eternal bliss itself will be given to the saints only when clad in the body of the resurrection. The fullness of man is incarnate — it is never divided into two. Separated from a soul, a body becomes a corpse — separated from a body a soul becomes a departed. Man as man is incarnate.

If we wish to look for things in man which are not subject to fanciful interpretation and to constant vacillation it is certainly not in the consciousness of man that we must look. The psychological realm of man is in constant motion, it changes at every moment as does the face of the sea. This is not surprising. On the one hand this field of consciousness extends and diminishes according to the laws of our physical and psychological nature, and on the other hand it reflects like the face of a lake what is going on both in spirit and in body. Whatever goes on in that depth or in that height which we call the spirit of man, whatever happens between this spirit and the divine Spirit finds a reflection in our consciousness; and whatever happens in our body, whether it is simply physical occurrences of health or disease, or the highest activities of the human mind also reflect in our consciousness. But although in both cases we should speak of reflection and not of something which belongs completely to the field of soul or psyche or the consciousness, a reflection means that what is seen reflected is only partly true. On the one hand, when we look into the face of a lake and see the sky, we do not see the whole sky. We do not even see what we could see if we lifted up our eyes heavenward. We only see a small part of the sky — that which is within the scope of the lake. On the other hand it is enough to throw a small pebble into the lake, or it is enough for a breeze to touch the surface of the waters, for everything to change shape. The sky and the clouds and whatever grows on the edge of the lake begin to move and change their aspect. If you wish to draw a conclusion by looking into a mirror — as to what is reflected in it — you must be extremely careful; it is partial and it is always distorted to one degree or another, and very often as in a lake, things are upside-down. This is not simply a joke. If you look at our situation with regard to God, so often we reason out God beginning with ourselves, instead of beginning with God and reasoning out ourselves in relation to God. This is what we have not yet learned to put right by spiritual experience.

I am aware of the fact that there is a deep connection between the body and the soul of man. This can be shown easily on two levels. On the one hand we all know of the interest which has flared up in the last decade regarding psychosomatic disease. We are aware of the fact that things going on in man's soul are not only reflected vaguely in the state of his body, but that according to definite mechanisms in a systematic way they always provoke the same response in the various organs of this body, particularly in the nervous system of man. On the other hand, if we turn to the field of religious and spiritual experience, whether Eastern or Western, we find that since the earliest times people were aware of the fact that there is a two-way traffic between soul and body, between the psychology of man and the body he is possessed with. Thus while it is true that the things happening in the soul reflect in the body, mar the body, very often transform the body, it is also true that the body for its part has a very great influence on the psychological realm of man's life.

I would like here to make a general statement, and then to give two examples. If you study psychology and physiology you discover very easily and on the level of simple and rather elementary physiology — that every psychological event, every emotional event, every intellectual activity, results in glandular changes, muscular changes and so on. Here are two examples which may be worth giving. The first is from art. If you look at a statue like 'Le Penseur' by Rodin, you will see clearly, plastically, what I mean. This man is seated, thinking; but when you see this statue you discover that he is not thinking only with his brain. He thinks with the whole of himself. All his body is bent upon thinking, he is thinking with every muscle, with all the parts of his body, with the whole position of his body. He is a man who is transformed into thought incarnate. So if you prefer, thought and incarnation are the same thing at a certain depth. When our thought is superficial of course, it reaches a lesser expansion so far as the perception of our bodies is concerned. When we frown, the expression on our face changes and so on. And now to come to my second example. This knowledge was used by the ascetics of the hesychast school in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries to form a method to produce psychological states which could then be used in order to pray in an undisturbed way. The psychological states of total attention, total disengagement

from passion and from disorderly thought were achieved by means of a physical technique. They were never thought of as being prayer themselves. They were methods by which conditions could be established through which prayer could be undisturbed. This applied both to the passions and to intellectual disorders.

When we think of man today, however, we are accustomed to think in rational terms, we think of man in his intellect, or in his emotional life to the extent to which it is part of his conscious life, and we forget that man has got roots infinitely deeper than these; and that his intellect of which he is so proud and his emotions which he is so completely unable to control are not the total man and are very far from this. Man's existence is rooted in an act of divine will. Everyone of us exists, because he was willed of God. And this divine will itself is an act, not of condescension, but of love; it is an act in which God creates man in order to make him partaker of all he possesses and almost of all he is. We are gods by vocation. The difference between us and God, in this process and this attainment of deification, lies in the fact that we can be gods by participation not gods by nature; in the same way in which Christ was man by participation in our nature, and God in himself. And in this act of God, in this creative word of God, with its background of will and of love, is our root. We have no roots in ourselves and we have no roots in God, as far as nature is concerned, and this gives us both complete dependence upon him and, at the same time, a strange quality of independence. We exist because we were willed, and yet because we are not of necessity for God, because the act of creation is not necessary for God to be himself, because in a certain sense, we are superfluous to him, because he is plenitude without us, we possess a peculiar independence. We are not a reflection of his, we are not a shadow of his, we are not a minor aspect of his existence. We are ourselves, posited face to face with God, deriving our existence from his will and yet, independent of him, in what we can accept or reject, both him and whatever he offers and whatever he gives. The will of God is all powerful. He can create, he can do what he chooses, save one thing: he cannot compel any creature to love him, because love is sovereign freedom and is incompatible with either coercion or determination.

When we say that we are willed of God, because before we exist we are loved of him, we define the very root, and the very rock on which our existence stands. But we should not be mistaken; we are not spiritual beings, we are not a soul imprisoned in a body, or a soul, who for a time is connected with a body; we are an incarnate spirit, and the plenitude of man does not lie in his spirit or in his soul, but in spirit-soul together with his body. In that respect our body has an infinitely greater significance, and infinitely greater possibilities than we usually remember. If we turn to the biblical revelation and to all the spirit and the facts of the Old and the New Testament, I think that it becomes so clear that, whatever God has created, was created alert, live, and not inert and dead. We speak of dead matter, of inert matter and now that we are both blind and insensitive to the life of things, matter is heavy, opaque and inert. But to God, it is neither of these things. God has created all things such that they can live and rejoice in him. This does not imply that things have the same kind of consciousness that we possess; but who is to say that the kind of consciousness that we have, is any better, any deeper, any more God-conscious than whatever other kind of consciousness there may be? Things are in God; they are capable of knowing their master and they are capable of rejoicing in their Saviour; and they are capable of shining, of reflecting the light of God himself. Otherwise, all the miracles, in which nature and flesh are concerned, in the Old and the New Testament, cease to be miracle, and become acts of magic, not acts of harmony, not acts of friendship, not acts of obedience and joy on the part of nature, which hears the words of God and perceives his will, but one-sided acts of power, wrought upon a passive nature, and, therefore, meaningless; God-centred and man-centred, but leaving aside the whole of creation. When the Lord Jesus Christ commands the raging waves to be still and to the wind to blow no more on the sea of Galilee, when in various events of the New Testament he commands things to respond to his voice, when he raises Lazarus or whenever he works other mighty works, there is a relationship, a relatedness between what is created by God and him. There is harmony.

A miracle is not something which is marvelous, although it appears so to us; a miracle is the normal relationship between God and his world, the supple, live, loving relationship there can be between what God has made, capable of knowing him, of hearing him, and himself. This, I believe, is true to biblical theology, this is also true to the teaching of the apostles, to the teaching and indeed to the life and experience of the Church. This experience is to be found described in the writings of a man like Simeon the New Theologian. Once he comes back from church; he has received communion; he sits on his couch, and ponders. He looks around, he looks at himself and marvels. These hands, he says, so frail, so powerless, are the hands of God; this body, so mean, so old, this decaying body is the place of the divine presence; and this cell, so small, so ugly, is greater than the heavens, because it contains God. This is no allegory, is no fanciful thinking; it is direct, deep, concrete experience, rooted in all there is in the Old and the New Testament. All that is created by God is in God, related deeply to him, capable of sensing him, of knowing him. If we only could be aware of the potentialities of what God has created — I am not thinking now of what science is disclosing, of the extraordinary possibilities of the atom — I am speaking of something deeper than this, more intrinsic to matter even than its own natural capabilities. There is not an atom in this world, from the meanest speck of dust to the greatest star, which does not hold in its core, possess still in its depth, if I may put it that way, the thrill, the tremor of its first movement of existence, of its coming into being, of its possessing infinite possibilities and of entering into the divine realm, so that it knows God, rejoices in him. And if the world appears dark to us, compact, dense, opaque, it is because something tragic has happened, which we call the Fall, however we define it in its details, by which the sovereign freedom of obedience and harmony has been replaced by the iron rules and laws which reach to a certain depth and yet have not enslaved what God has made to be free.

And this capacity of the world to be in God and to have God within itself, this capacity of the matter of this world, leaving aside our soul and our spirit, is the very condition of the Incarnation on the one hand, and of our belief in the sacraments on the other hand. In the Incarnation, God who is without any common measure with what he has created, becomes intrinsic to his creation, puts on human

flesh, which is a summing up of all those things which are, which exist in this created world. He assumes all the substance of the world, and this substance, not only in his own personal historical body, but in the whole world, is mysteriously, unfathomably connected with him, the personal God; connected personally, in a new relationship. And when, after the Resurrection, Christ ascends into heaven, he takes, in this mysterious divine act, the whole substance of our world into the very depth of the divine reality. God present in the world, part not only of its history but of its substance, and the world present in God.

On this, as well as on what I have said before, is based what we believe of the sacraments, or of those mysterious actions performed within the Church, by the power of God, which make the substance of this world partake of things divine and make them capable of conveying these things to us. The waters of baptism, the oil of anointing, the holy chrism, the bread, the wine, are brought to God, taken out of the context of the world that has grown Godless; they are brought into the Kingdom of God and become free again; free by an act of human freedom and faith and by an act of divine love. And these things themselves, not in an allegorical way, not as a visible action and substance independent of the divine action but in themselves, by themselves, become vehicles of divine power, divine grace, divine light, become a miracle in themselves, a marvel in themselves, because they are restored to wholeness and to their creaturely freedom of communion.

If we remember this we should realise that it is not only in our rational mind, in our emotional sphere, to the extent to which it is conscious, that the roots of our relationship with God lie; that relationship embraces all and everything in us. And indeed, when God wishes to reach out to us, fallen creatures incapable of reaching out to him, it is through our bodies and through the substance of this world that he does it. To our act of faith, God responds by the miracle of baptism, that is of incorporation. To our act of faith which is within an existing relationship, God responds by giving us participation to his body and blood, and to life divine. The great events of the Christian life are all rooted in matter, not in spirit, because before our spirit becomes quick and live and alert, it must be reared and strengthened; and yet, God reaches out to us when we are at the depth of the pit: where sin abounds grace abounds even more freely. And we know so much about it without ever thinking of it; how little we know with our intellect about the capabilities of our body. How much may be conveyed — and I am speaking now on a plane which is both most ordinarily human, and goes far beyond this — by the touch of a hand; how much our bodies possess direct perception and knowledge and wisdom.

And so, when we think of man we must remember that there are these two aspects in us, the conscious, and the other aspect which we cannot even call conscious or unconscious, the physical, the material one which has its own capabilities which we do not even suspect, which we see from time to time, in a glimpse, in the lives of saints or in events of our own lives. And then we must also remember that even in the realm which we praise of consciousness and reason, there are so many things which do not belong to the rational although they have nothing to do with unreasonableness. There are realms in our perception of life, in our activities in life, which are not of the intellect and in which, according to a phrase of Professor S. L. Frank, the intellect plays its true role — that of a servant; love, the sense of beauty, the sense of worship which all go far beyond the realm of our intellect. So, when we think of the relationship there is between us and God, we must remember that this relationship is rooted first of all in the fact that we are willed and loved of God. Remember St. John the Divine's words: the marvel of life does not lie in that we love God, but that he first has loved us. And this does not apply only to fallen humanity, to the act of salvation, but to our very existence and to the fact that he has formed us, and that whatever he has formed, is related to him, deeply.

What can we say more concretely about this relationship which exists between God and us, apart from the intellect, or when our intellect is incapable of having this relationship? Apart from the intellect, as I said before, there is the basic relationship of the creative act, the basic situation of matter with regard to God, the basic significance of the body as being an integral part of man, and therefore part of its destiny of salvation. 'I believe in the resurrection of the body' we say in the Apostles' Creed. There is the reaching out of God towards us in the sacraments, in the miracles, in all these actions in which God acts directly on us, including the body. Again, there are these events, these situations in which God reaches our body through spirit and soul. The Athonite Staretz Silouan said that grace reaches out to us in three waves as it were: we first come into contact with grace in prayer, in meditation, and so on, at the very summit of our being, in our spirit; and when our spirit is imbued with grace, then grace pervades our soul, what we could call our psychological realm, conscious and unconscious, and from there it reaches out further to our body; because we can see in the lives of saints that they were different from us, not only in spirit, not only in mentality, but also in their bodies. All the major things that belong to our spiritual life do not result from our intellect, they are only perceived by our intellect.

The root of Christian pedagogy lies in this recognition that the intellect is something that does not create a situation but discovers the situation, takes hold of the situation. We do not expect first to teach a child, or even a grown-up, what life eternal is, we believe that we can give him an experience of it and only then will he begin to discover things. There are things, which on the level of the intellect are insoluble, but which are being solved in the experience of things. This does not apply only to religion. It applies to beauty, to art, it applies to love. One does not give evidence of musical or artistic beauty before making someone experience it. And however rich the world's literature is in books, in poetry and prose, in which love is spoken of, described, conveyed somehow, it cannot be conveyed unless the person has a direct personal experience of love. And so, sacraments are given and then, as gradually we grow intellectually, emotionally, in our will, in our physical capabilities, we are taught by men and God, how to comprehend our own experience, how to see the working of divine grace, how to understand what otherwise we would never be able to understand. It belongs to a realm where no comparison reaches; all the comparisons convey meaning only to those who have already the real experience of things. Otherwise they are only misleading.

There is one more thing I would like to say. There is a moment in the life of Christ in the Gospels which shows again, but in another way, the relatedness between God and the world, between things created and divine grace, and which reveals the uncreated way in which God communicates himself. This is the event of the Transfiguration. There are two icons of the Transfiguration which struck me very deeply when I saw them in the original in the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow. One is by Rublev and the other by his master, Theophan the Greek. In both there are three mountain peaks, the Lord Jesus in the center, with Moses and Elijah on the right and left hand sides, and the three disciples on the slopes of the mountain. The difference between the two icons lies in the way in which the things are seen. The Rublev icon shows Christ in the brilliancy of his dazzling white robes which cast light on everything around. This light falls on the disciples, on the mountain and the stones, on every blade of grass. Within this light, which is the divine splendour — the divine glory, the divine light itself inseparable from God, all things acquire an intensity of being which they could not have otherwise; in it they attain to a fullness of reality which they can have only in God. The other icon is more difficult to perceive in a reproduction. The background is silvery and appears grey. The robes of Christ are silvery with blue shades, and the rays of light falling around are also white, silvery and blue. Everything gives an impression of much less intensity. Then we discover that all these rays of light falling from the Divine Presence and touching the things which surround the transfigured Christ do not give relief but give transparency to things. One has the impression that these rays of divine light touch things and sink into them, penetrate them, touch something within them so that from the core of these things, of all things created the same light reflects and shines back as though the divine life quickens the capabilities, the potentialities of all things and makes all reach out towards itself. At that moment the eschatological situation is realised, and in the words of St. Paul 'God is all and in all'.

These are the points which I wanted to make concerning the matter of this world which in the beginning came forth out of naught in an act of divine splendour, of joy, of harmony, which is now darkened by human sin and which remains darkened because the flesh is a corruption of the body. But when the body is freed from passion and freed from evil, and enters into the mystery of the divine life and is transfigured, then the divine glory reaches down into the depth in which matter, created at first pure and alive in God, is still trembling with the first tremor of its nascent light. To achieve this is the path and purpose of asceticism. As Father Bulgakov said, 'Kill the flesh if you wish to attain to, to acquire a body.' Kill what is passion, kill what is corruption, kill what is death, and then you will discover that the body which you possess is the body which is akin to the whole creation and together with the whole creation, but in a way far beyond any imagination, has been united to the divine image, the divine reality in the Incarnation, that pure act of God which through the whole economy of salvation, moves towards its completion in the transfiguration of the world, when God shall be all in all.