

# **THE FEAR OF GOD AS AN INTEGRATING FACTOR OF EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL PROGRESS**

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*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the holy is understanding (Prov 9:10)*

As a servant of the Christian Gospel, it may appear quite strange, at first glance at least, to speak about ‘the fear of God’ and this is for two reasons. Firstly, because it is well known that the Gospel of Jesus Christ literally means ‘good news’, which primarily signifies the opposite of fear. And secondly, because the human person at every moment lives under the tyranny of so many fears in our disturbed times and it would be regarded as at least unwise, if not cruel, to add also the fear of God to this general agony.

Yet, in writing out of the Judeo-Christian tradition for members not only of every possible Christian denomination but also for followers of other religions – or of no religion – who are nonetheless united in their common quest for knowledge and wisdom, I felt the need to discover the most striking ‘common denominator’ of us all. And I believe this to be the fear of God.

As we see in the Biblical quote above, the fear of God has nothing to do with any other kind of fear in our life. Rather, it transcends every concept, just as God Himself always transcends all our experience and imagination.

The fear of God, in the Biblical sense, is not only, nor primarily, a feeling of horror, as we have come to know this in particularly difficult and dangerous moments of our life. This would signify an impermissible reduction of the elementary religious phenomenon to the limitations of a

momentary psychological reaction, which lies more or less in the realm of animal instincts than in the reflected experience of awe, so characteristic of the human being.

We would say that the fear of God is equivalent to the recognition of God's existence. In this perspective, fearing God is not to feel afraid or threatened by God's presence, but to be aware of His omnipotence, omniscience and all-goodness. For this reason we would say that the fear of God basically embraces all negative and positive connotations of the term 'respect'. It is well-known that the famous German scholar of Comparative Religion, Rudolph Otto, achieved the most successful definition of the elementary religious feeling, when he characterised God as *mysterium tremendum* and at the same time as *mysterium fascinosum*. Only those who had the blessing of feeling genuinely religious for even a few moments of their life would be in a position to appreciate the validity and accuracy of this definition.

As the mystery *par excellence*, God remains hidden in His deep essence even when He is revealed through manifold ways in the divine economy. God remains hidden and incomprehensible also in the event of the Incarnation. Precisely for this reason, the great Fathers of the early Church already made a clear distinction between God's essence on the one hand, which always remains inaccessible to the human person and the rest of the created world, and God's energies on the other, which reveal to us the quality of His relationship with the created world. It is therefore quite natural to speak of God as known and unknown, as *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*, as beyond every concept and being and, at the same time, as present everywhere and filling the very least particle of matter.

However, this paradox does not necessarily lead to agnosticism or idolatry, which are the ultimate extremes in religious life. One of the most profound theologians of the early Church, St Gregory the Theologian, explained this paradoxical relationship with the living God as a miraculous sign of His providence. He said that 'God attracts us towards Himself through what is known, and through what is unknown He is marvelled by us' (*Hom.* 38,7 PG 36:317C).

Having said all of this, we realise that the fear of God is not just a temporary feeling of anguish but rather a peacefully chosen human

attitude towards God. This attitude is dictated not primarily by the Unknown and Uncertain, from which we would like to be protected, but rather by an already well-known and experienced love of our Creator, of which we would not like to be deprived. This is why the fear of God is characterised in the Psalms as 'immaculate', and for this reason 'perennial' (cf. Ps 19:9).

Interpreted in this way, the fear of God is not worry concerning possible negative actions to be taken by Him against us (this was the feeling of very primitive man towards blind and impersonal natural forces), but rather our spiritual anxiety that we do not become unworthy of His providence and protection. In other words, it is not any eventual punishment by God which is the object of our fear, but rather His undeserved love; and precisely because this love is undeserved, we are worried about losing it.

This characteristic distinction in Christian spirituality had not been noticed even by a sharp mind like F. Nietzsche. This is why he blamed all Christians for having a servile morality dictated by fear of punishment and by the reward of virtue, which in fact have nothing to do with the morality of free and truly spiritual persons.

As a touching example of Christian sensitivity towards God's love, I will never forget the following story from Mt. Athos. As students, a group of us had visited the famous Monastery of Iviron. An old monk named Athanasios, who was one of the most educated Brothers of that Monastery, speaking to us about God's presence in the Holy Eucharist, broke out into tears and said: 'God, the eternal and uncontainable in the whole universe, has humbled Himself to the point of being present in the smallest crumb of bread, in order to be received by me, the sinful and unworthy one'. Precisely such sensitivity towards God is what the Bible characterises as the fear of God. For it is clearly stated by St John the Evangelist that 'perfect love casts out fear' (1John 4:18).

Having roughly sketched the meaning of the fear of God in the Bible, let us now consider its relation to education and spiritual progress in general. First of all, it needs to be said that education is of course related to the acquisition of knowledge. However, this is only one part of the long and painful process called education. If we analyse the relevant terms in

Greek and Latin, we realise that, through scholarly endeavour, we have the ambition of reaching a broader horizon, which transfigures our own nature, and not only the view of the world around.

The Greeks, as known, used the term *paideia* for education, which derives from the word *pais*, meaning child. Obviously, their intention was to indicate that, through education and learning, one is led to a world where the true and the beautiful and the holy – the so-called *universalia* of the Middle Ages – are found to be the real values of this life, beyond any pragmatic expediencies in daily experience. In such a view, one rediscovers the ‘paradise lost’, which is identical to the innocent childhood years when dream and miracle are the driving force of prosaic everyday life. It is precisely for this reason that the various subjects that contribute to the transfiguration of the human being are characteristically called ‘humanities’, aiming as they do at the salvation of human dignity and optimism.

Having said this, we are now able to analyse more easily the Latin term ‘*educatio*’, from the verb ‘*educō*’, meaning ‘to lead to’. We recognise here also the root of the term ‘duke’ - the leader. It is clear that through education, that is through proper learning, one is brought to a world of higher and eternal values.

Only after such a detailed etymological analysis are we in a position to realise that education can by no means be identified with knowledge. For knowledge is only knowing how, offering the mere possibility, which does not necessarily reflect the existential transfiguration of human nature itself. The latter is adequately expressed through another more profound and more sacred term, namely wisdom.

In this respect it becomes clear why the Bible speaks of wisdom as the fruit of the fear of God, while St. Paul does not hesitate to remind us of the negative and dangerous character of knowledge when he states that ‘knowledge puffs up, but love edifies’ (1Cor 8:1).

From all the above, it is clear that, through the fear of God, the human person has the most profound means of communicating with the divine Creator. Yet this communication does not simply mean the maintenance of a static relationship. It is rather an ongoing dynamic process

towards a moral end, and integration of the human personality, which lasts until the final moment of our biological life.

This observation leads directly to the heart of the mystery of the relation between God and humankind, already established in the creation of man according to ‘the image and likeness of God’.

Precisely in this crucial moral and religious question, it must be said that the ancient Greeks had an admirable intuition in believing – well before God’s Biblical revelation – that the ultimate ‘space’ and ‘measure’ for the human being is not any secular environment or value, but God Himself. This is the genuine meaning behind the fragment of Heraclitus which states that ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων which means that ‘the the place of the human being is God Himself’. And it is a miraculous fact that the same conviction is expressed many centuries later in Byzantine Christian spirituality, which always described the Incarnate God as ἡ χώρα τῶν ζώντων, which means that God is the space of true life.

Not unrelated to this view of our relationship with God is the characteristic term δοῦλος θεοῦ which literally signifies not simply the servant of God but, most importantly, the person ‘bound’ to God. For δοῦλος comes from the verb δένω meaning ‘bind’. And there is no question that, if Nietzsche had noticed this derivation, he would not have spoken in such a pejorative manner about Christian morality as being ‘servile’. Let us therefore pray to God that we may become worthy of these bonds to His will and His boundless love.




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