

About our spiritual restlessness

by Vladeta Jerotic , taken from "ISKON", translation Natasha Tasic

What is to be done with one's spiritual restlessness?

People's spiritual restlessness is a part, a reflection or an echo of the all-pervading restlessness, upheaval and antagonism in the entire universe. Scientific discoveries of the greatest scholars (Copernicus, Galileo, Bruno, Newton, etc.) over the centuries have revealed the deterministic laws of cause and effect, while recent research in quantum physics, astronomy and molecular biology seem to underscore the unpredictability in the movement of matter, suggesting an indeterministic, rather than a deterministic view of the world.

According to the findings of prenatal psychology and embryology, the creation and destruction of cells, an intricate dynamic conditioning the incessant changes in the embryo and foetus begins with the very conception of a person and lasts until his/her death. The perpetual warfare in the universe, within and between people, as well as inside the atom was known to, or only suspected by the greatest pre-Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece. Indeed, there is within persons discord between body and soul, soul and spirit, emotion and reason, consciousness and unconsciousness.

The decisive question that humankind has put to itself early in history, and still does, is whether there is any order or significance in this tremendous commotion all around and within us. Although there has cropped up an occasional hard-core materialist or atheist among the philosophers of ancient Greece who disaffirmed the very existence of the Prime Mover, attributing everything existing to unintentional act, most thinkers in all the ancient civilisations and cultures, way before Socrates and Plato, recognised order in disorder, quiet in disquiet, "the Mover Immovable" in the mobility of all things, aware of the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, ascribing to Him diverse properties and appellations. What is of interest to us is the array of theories present

throughout the millennia in philosophy, religion and science dealing with the eternal mystery enshrouding the creation of the universe and humankind, of life and death. "Christians are all too familiar with the fact that for one's salvation, this eternal enigma need not be disclosed to the reason and the mind, for it is revealed of itself spontaneously to the hearts of those to whom God has revealed himself in love. Love is the key to the riddles put to all the people by God, who even allows those with a purity of heart to grasp them. A prerequisite which makes it possible for us to begin approaching God's Love is that we trust in Him with our whole being, for it is impossible to grow more devout unless we have recognised the causes and effects of our own spiritual restlessness.

Restlessness, strife, perturbation, be it internal or external, is impossible to avoid, sometimes until the very end of one's life, even if one has chosen consciously the path of righteousness - monastic or otherwise. A Christian is well aware of why this is so. The climbing up to the Mount Carmel, the ascension of the Lord's Ladder is the path to the Golgotha. With every untrodden stair or step of the ladder leading upwards, one encounters a new temptation which could come from God, from oneself, from others or from demons; some Christian believers, perhaps over generalizing, hold all the temptations to be of demonic nature, adhering to the following well-known quote from Jacob's Epistle: "When tempted, no one should say that God is tempting him, for God cannot tempt with evil, nor does He tempt at all."

Unreported and unconfessed personal sins (usually the more serious ones) might not be the sole reason why many people reject firmly religion and the Church; even some good Christians feel the apprehension that if they were to carry out Christ's commandments too zealously not only would they not attain the expected serenity and 'reward', but rather that they would have greater difficulties in life, and that, even if they achieved Job's virtuousness they would be tempted just as thoroughly as Job was. Both of these reasons, which prevent people from becoming Christians, are inexcusable and dangerous

because they react in an erroneous way to their own spiritual restlessness.

The spiritual restlessness within us is, first of all, a positive restlessness, which helps one to advance and to mature. This restlessness has been sent by God as an admonition, a challenge and a chance given to 'the fallen one' to rise up again, lift his/her eyes to the heavens awaiting the missive of the Holy Ghost who shall lead him/her by worldly paths to the heavenly vastness. What are the most common reasons that person is restless? Because s/he is hungry and thirsty, because s/he is tormented by drives (sexual and aggressive), because s/he is ill and in pain, because she is inquisitive, worried, because s/he loves and hates and is afraid of death. Let us analyse some of these most frequent causes of people's restlessness. Bodily hunger and thirst cause the most acute restlessness. Only when they are fulfilled does one realise that s/he is in reality not content. This is the time when perhaps one realises, via transcendence, God, justice, that there is within him/her another, similarly strong, metaphysical hunger and thirst. The sexual and the aggressive drives come in strength only after the instinct of self-preservation. They must be satisfied from a very early age ('children's sexuality' is no longer for psychology merely Freud's fantasy, but rather a fact; 'children's aggressiveness' is no concoction of Alfred Adler's or Melanie Klein's, but rather something all parents know from experience). They too demand to be satisfied (we are not, at the moment, speaking of the possibilities of sublimation) so one can realise that beyond the sexual drive lies love, a transcendental aspect of sex, and beyond aggressiveness - the quest for knowledge, which makes itself manifest as curiosity. For when one tempers sexuality with genuine love for the partner, the incessant God-seeker in him/her (when once truly awakened) shall seek further and discover, now with spiritual eyes, that beyond the love for one's partner stands the love for God, and beyond the quest for knowledge - the search for God. No one is safe from disease and pain, be they physical or psychological. The great doctor, philosopher and mystic from the Middle

Ages, Paracelsus, once said: "Illnesses come from the kingdom of nature, whereas recovery comes from the kingdom of the spirit." The persistence of an illness and pain offer one the opportunity to recognise beyond the apparent cause of illness (bacteria or a virus) the true cause - the being who warns us of our sinful and mortal nature beckoning us through infirmity. A person is spiritually restless because s/he both loves and hates, sometimes, and for a long time, one and the same person (his/her child, spouse): s/he is unhappy when his/her love remains unrequited (s/he is then capable of turning into hate the love previously felt), unhappy when in fear of the loss of a loved one, deeply sorrowful and restless when the loss actually occurs. On the basis of this truth that has its roots in the independent human wish, the great Indian philosopher, Buddha, grounded his philosophical teaching incorporating the four truths and eightfold way to salvation. One thing, however, remains clear to both the Christian and the psychologist that people shall remain restless for as long as they love and hate.

Ultimately, everyone fears death (thus the spiritual restlessness), for at the root of every human fear lies the fear of death. Everyone has worries, as 'worry' is an ontological category of the human being, just as fear and guilt. And what lies beyond fear and worry? "As long as one lives inappropriately s/he feels a fear of death. If one approaches God during his/her life, then His love extinguishes both the fears", asserts St. Isaac the Syrian (7th century A.D.)

In analysing the most widespread of human restlessness, conflicts and perturbations as well as their causes, our aim has been to underscore the significance and purpose of all of these types of restlessness.

Unless one recognises the purpose and significance of spiritual restlessness s/he is compelled to resort to compulsive repetition, to defence mechanisms (especially repression, projection, negation and identification with the aggressor), to chronic neuroses, resignation and depression. All our restlessness in such cases becomes futile, just like in the case of Maloch who gorges on victims, but is never sated.

In every Orthodox calendar are listed the causes of the most severe

kinds of spiritual restlessness - the cardinal (or deadly) sins, of which practically all are the outcome of our drives which we have never fathomed to discern the Spirit:

Pride - the sin originating from the aggressive drive and the quest for the knowledge of man-god, beyond whom one has not discovered the love of God-man.

Covetousness - the sin which comes from the urge to collect and own possessions, beyond which Christ's recommendation has not been perceived: Do not worry about what you will eat, drink, collect and possess, for these things are taken care of by the One counting each single hair on your head.

(paraphrase)

Lust - the sin rooted in the sexual drive which has become an end in itself, instead of being gradually sublimated during one's lifetime to reveal beyond itself the longing of one person to unite with an Other into a Whole from which man has sprung.

Envy - alongside pride, one of the strongest and oldest of human driving passions. According to claims in the Old Testament (Ezekiel, 28, 12-16, Isaiah, 14,12-14), Lucifer fell from God in envy, the serpent from the Garden beguiled Adam and Eve out of envy towards God, and even a newborn, child psychologists maintain, begins to feel envy; later on in life envy is joined by jealousy, and both of these passions are capable of tormenting one even in old age, until the very death. Envy may be overcome with assistance from God, transmuted thus into the joy of giving, the bliss a person feels delighting with all the heart in each righteous accomplishment of a fellow being.

Gluttony - the sin where a person blindly satisfies the need for nourishment, remaining its slave his/her whole life, instead of allowing him/herself to feel hunger and thirst, not only for earthly foods which God is well aware are essential for survival, but also hunger and thirst for God and His justice. Anger - thrives on one's aggressive drives, pride and envy, boundless, obstinate egotism and selfishness, the desire for absolute power and subjugation of nature and fellow beings to

his/her own self-will. The selfsame energy which wrath saps for itself, the enlightened Christian mind channels in the opposite direction - not having modesty, meekness and tolerance.

Sloth - the sin of all those who have not vanquished their fear of life and of death, whose wish it is to remain their own arbiters, who have recoiled from the love that their fellow being offers, who have never done away with the ambivalence of the obsolete human feelings, love and hate.

It is not "Fate", the evil fury or Doom existing in folk pagan belief that which determines the human life from birth till death, but rather one's free will, his/her decision pertaining to the significance and purpose of his/her spiritual restlessness. "Fate is the snare we lay for ourselves" (Isaac Singer) by refusing to search (for if we search, we shall find -whoever knocks, the gate opens for him/her!) for that which is hidden in the depths of our restlessness. The spirit only may reveal to us the significance of the depth of our spiritual and physical restlessness. In Christianity we call this Spirit the Holy Ghost, the third entity of the Holy Trinity.

At the monastery of Vitanovci (perhaps the only monastery in Serbia where no one talks about politics!) I recently came across a righteous devotee, middle-aged or older, almost uneducated, a refugee from Bosnia, in whose village everything had been burned to the ground, both of whose sons had been wounded in battle (probably to remain invalids all their lives). When I asked him how he quells his spiritual restlessness, he answered convincingly and placidly: „I cannot quell it otherwise save by the sustained rereading of the Gospel and the Psalms". Here is an example of a man whose soul has been appeased by the Spirit, in whom he trusted, for it revealed, using the Word of God, the significance of restlessness. Is not in the educated man the presence of this Spirit equally as strong as in this homespun Orthodox man? No, it is not, and shall so remain until he ceases to be governed by pride, the gravest of all sins, for all the sins issue from it! ..Peace, proud man!" propounds the great Dostoevsky, equally to proud Europe

and to the proud Slavs. Summary

This article deals with personal spiritual restlessness and its causes. Diverse sources of spiritual restlessness have been analysed, such as: physical hunger and thirst, sexual and aggressive drives, ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards one and the same person, as well as the fear of death. Spiritual restlessness has initially been perceived as something that helps a person to mature, which process of maturing brings the person nearer to God. However, unless one interprets this spiritual restlessness as a challenge, unless one discovers its significance, this restlessness becomes a negative, destructive force. Finally, the cardinal human sins have been analysed (the so-called deadly sins, according to the teachings of the Orthodox church) from the viewpoint of one's spiritual life, as well as the means to subdue these sins, according to the teachings of Christianity.