

God in Dialogue:

Divine Disclosure – Human Self Discovery

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Jorgen Thaarup

Selfishness or self-discovery

1. One of the characteristics of the modern culture is the individual project on self-realization. After the collapse of authorities and a common set of values, the individual finds him or her self in a vacuum, looking for identity and meaning. If no authority outside gives the individual value, the individual has to develop him or her self in relation to nobody else but one self. The pluralistic lifestyle is known by a very low social pressure on the individual to fulfil any specific model or ideal. Individualism on all level of life is not only accepted, but is understood as the way of modern life.

2. The Greek myth about prince Narcissus, who felt in love with the mirror image of himself, has been the illustration of modern life. Education and way of life is often expressed as self-realization. It is a fully accepted reason to choose this or that job because you want to be faithful to your own feelings and potentials. Relations can be broken relatively easy if the individual for some reason becomes aware that new possibilities open up under new conditions. On the way to new magnify peak-experiences personally coaches and trainers are consulted frequently. Self-realization is the positive word used by the individual. For the surroundings maybe the right word would be self-exposure. The big life project for the individual is him or her self, no matter where the project is worked out either the place is fitness centre, university, home or church. Life is self-centred. In the life of the church, sometimes the modern congregational development programme's focusing on spiritual gifts has been a cover for selfishness. The word duty has been devaluated over years. And the word call has sometime been used only to express individual ambitions.

3. Another characteristic of the modern culture is the increasing alienation. The still faster life rhythm and lack of continuity leave people over to themselves with the unanswered question about whom they really are. The fragmentation of what you are doing during a life period into small peaces breaks down the understanding of where you came from and where you are going. The few experiences of being someone important and extraordinary in this very moment is keeping up the motivation to go on in life in spite of very short horizons for the next goals. Fast results of your work have been a needed demand if not disillusion and alienation are dominating the situation. Burn out syndrome is threatening you, and simultaneously your life is going faster and faster reaching out after new goals while you only see a little glimpse of this very presence, where you hardly recognize yourself.

4. The reaction to this is seen in a multiply of phenomena: Some are choosing simple lifestyle without television and 24-hour online cell telephone and Internet. Some are trying to slow down the daily speed. Some are focusing on few and exclusive areas of interest but with higher quality in engagement. One field of interest is physical exercises and sport activities in nature. Another field is mental exercises to extent the personal capacity to reflect on psychological and spiritual resources for personal development. Meditation and sensitivity courses, alternative health and bodybuilding, New Age programmes and Christian retreat and pilgrimage events are all pieces in the big puzzle of the Well-Being culture. The distinction between somatic activities and spiritual searching has disappeared. Behind these very different activities we find individual's private project to find themselves and who they are. This introvert searching, even when it has an outreach expression, is honest and true. The willingness to be reconciled with oneself and be more faithful to who you really are, makes people able to use unlimited and enormous resources and personal sacrifices to reach the goal. Individuals show in behaviour that they want to discover who they are and want to live in harmony with what they discover.

First question: Is there a difference between on the one hand simple egoism and selfishness and on the other hand true and honest searching for who you are? Are selfishness and self-discovery two steps in the same direction or in opposite directions?

To go into yourself

5. The youngest son in Jesus' parable, Luke 15:11-31, came to himself. After a period of alienation and disillusion in a situation of crisis, "he came to himself," εἰς εαυτον δε ελθων, Luke 15:17. What does it mean to be your self? Does it mean that you before were something else? The moment of being himself is not the moment of being reconciled with the Father, Luke 15:20ff. It is a step before, but an absolutely needed step on the way to be well received in the Father home. The opposite wording in NT is εξεστημι, εξ αυτων, "out of yourself." To be out of yourself is not the same as demonised, but you are not in harmony with what you should be or what you used to be. Something has caused a disharmony in your personality so that the surroundings observe your behaviour and see the difference from what was expected. For the youngest son the process of coming to himself was an important turning point. He didn't reconcile with his Father in that process, and it was not the final goal of his life journey.

6. Paul warns us against self-centre ness. 1 Cor 10:24, "Do not seek your own advantage," μηδεις το εαυτου ζητειτω. 1 Cor 13:5, "It does not insist on its own way," ου ζητει τα εαυτησ. Self-centre ness is here used in the meaning of a self-sufficient attitude which is an obstacle in your relations to God, to neighbours and to the created world. Another warning in Paul's universe is his description of how human and weak nature is standing against God. Paul describes the tension between "flesh" σαρκος and "Spirit" πνευματος. See e.g. Gal 5:13-22, Rom 8:5-23. In the Christian tradition we find a lot of examples how Paul's wording has been used to hold down every attention to the body. Especially in Western Christianity Paul has been interpreted in a Platonic way. Flesh has been miss-read as material, and spirit as spiritual (non-material; Gnostic definition of pneumatic). Rom 12:1 clarify that our spiritual ministry include our bodies, and our bodies exercise our spiritual life: "to present

your bodies.... Which is your spiritual worship.”

παραστησαι τα σωματα υμων την λογικην λατρειαν υηων.

Paul’s warning against self-centredness can never be in opposition to the Greatest Jewish Commandment, the ‘Schema Israel,’ love to God, Deut 6:5. “And a second,” quoted by Jesus in Matt 22:39, “is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself,’” Lev 19:18. To love your neighbour has its basis in love to yourself, Αγαπησεις ... ωσ σεαυτον. Paul too quotes the Lev 19:18, or maybe he quotes Jesus, in Rom 13:9 and Gal 5:14. Selfishness and loving yourself cannot be the same in Paul’s universe. The first is an act of sin. The second is directly commanded by the law of Christ.

Second question: How do we understand loving yourself without being self-centred?

7. In the OT the desert is a place of reconsideration and reconstruction. Everything is getting clear for you in the isolation in the wilderness. The desert is the place where you are facing yourself. The great text, often quoted by the desert Fathers, is Hosea 2:14-15, where the prophet talks to the faithless and lapsed people, “I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her... There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.” In the desert the people one time was called into being, called by the YHWH, the only One who really is, Ex 3:14. In later times the people are called back to the desert to become what it once was.

8. In the NT the desert is the place where Jesus is shaped to his ministry, Matt 4:1-11. Jesus is not by an accident or a mistake in the desert. Neither is he driven in the desert by evil forces or Demons. We find a Trinitarian perspective in this scene. The Spirit leads Jesus into the desert, similar to what the Spirit did to Ezekiel, Ez 37:1-14. The Father is present in his absence, similar to the Psalm 22:1-31. Jesus is left over to himself in the desert where all the outside and inside voices are speaking to him. Like a new Adam, Rom 5:17, 1 Cor 15:22, Jesus is tested, examined and shaped for his Messiah-ministry.

9. In Psalm 139 we find an individual who is reflecting on him or her self. The individual has seen that he or she is wonderfully created and formed. The understanding of who you are gives a self-respect and dignity. In the inward focusing the psalmist finds God and sees how God is in every little spot of the personality, in the somatic parts, in the mental and psychological parts and in the spirit. The individual finds God everywhere in his or her life. The reflections include the individual’s state of mind, and the mental environment, the individual is involved with. God was near the individual prior to the time, where any idea of God has arisen.

10. Luke quotes Paul saying: “God is not far from each one of us,” Act 17:27,

θεον και γε ου μακραν απο ενοσ εκαστου ημων υπαρχοντα. Paul talks to the non-Christian Greek people on the mount Areopagus, and he continues with a full acknowledgement that his listeners already are known by and connected to the only, living God: “In him we live and move and have our being,” Act 17:28a,

Εν αυτω γαρ ζωμεν και κινουμεθα και εστεν. To underline this Christian understanding of God’s presence in human life, Paul underlines with a quotation of the non-Christian poet,

Aratos, “For we are his offspring,” Act 17:27b, Του γαρ και γενοσ εσμεν. ... we are of the same DNA-code

11. Paul’s understanding of Gods presence in and among non-Christian people includes even the content of the law. The law, as a divine act of covenantal fellowship, is not part of the human constitution; it is a gift of grace. Paul sees in the life of the Gentiles that they have knowledge of God’s law and to some extent are following the spirit of the law. Rom 2:14-16. “When Gentiles, who do not posses the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.”

οταν γαρ εθνη τα μη νομον εχοντα φυσει τα του νομου ποιωσιν, ουτοι νομον μη εχοντες εαυτοις εισιν νομοσ. οιτινες ενδεικνυνται το εργον του νομου γραπτον εν ταισ καρδιαισ αυτων, συμμαρτυρουσησ αυτων τησ συνειδησεωσ και μεταξυ αλληλων των λογισμων κατηγορουντων η και απολογουμενων, εν η ημερα κρινει η θεον τα κρυπτα των ανθρωπωνκατα το ευαγγελιον μου δια Χριστου Ιησου. It does not mean that the Gentiles are justified or live right; their own conscience will judge them and bear witness against them, but it doesn’t change the circumstances that God is already in the Gentile’s life, when they are searching hearts and minds. This understanding is comparable with Paul’s writing about the good will in Rom 7:18-19. Paul describes the sinful human nature, but in his description he accepts that man has a good will. It is not the will, which is the problem, or corrupted ideas about good deeds. It is the weakness that hinders man to do, what he or she knows is right. “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it”

το γαρ θελειν παρακειται μοι, το δε κατεργαζεσθαι το καλον ου. Rom 7:18.

Third question: When people are facing themselves and are looking inward, what do they find? If they find God, what is the image of God they face?

Christology as perspective on anthropology and theology

12. Christ as the key to understand oneself: Col 1:16 teaches, “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ... all things have been created through him and for him.”

οτι εν αυτω εκισθη ταπαντα εν τοις ουρανοισ και επι της γησ ... τα παντα δι αυτον και εισ αυτον εκτισται. Christ is the model for the creation. Like a new Adam he is the unspoiled model of humanity. When we are searching for what it means that humankind is made in the image of God, we are lead to the unspoiled model, Christ, to find the answer. Gen 1:26-27, 5:1-2, 9:6-7 repeat how men and women are created “in the image of God, according to the likeness of God.” The image and likeness of God is in the humankind. Something in humankind is like God. The understanding of what we are and whom we are includes to some extend knowledge about God. When we dive into the mystery of our own nature, Christ is the unspoiled model to self-knowledge. Christ is the counter-picture to the sinful human nature, the mirror in which we face our own corrected picture.

13. Christ as the key to understand God: A number of texts teach, in different wordings, that Christ is the image of God: Hebr 1:1-3a “He is the reflection of ... “
οσων απαυγασμα ... (απαυγασμα = the radiation) Col 1:15 “He is the image of the invisible ... “ οσ εστιν εικων του θεου του αορατου. The mystery of God is unreachable for human beings, but Christ is reachable for us, and we can search Christ and in him, to some extent, reach an understanding of God.

14. Christ, a bridge between humankind and God. John 1:1-5, 9-14 describes Christ as the incarnated Logos. Christ’s union with God is a developed theme in John 14:9-11a, and 17:1-26. The incarnation understood as God’s self-reduction, God’s kenosis, is the theme of the Christ Hymn in Phil 2:7. Christ bridges the gap between humankind and God; Christ, the image of God, and Christ the unspoiled model of humankind, humans who are created in the image of God.

15. In the prayer of Christ in John 17:1-26 we find that God, the Father, is a present and active reality in Christ and in the Christians. John 17:3-5, 8, 21-22 describes the unity of the Divine persona, the Son and the Father. The Son is within the Father, and the Father is within the Son. The same formulations, John 17:21-23, have a parallel description of the relation between the Divine Triune God and the Christian believers. “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me...”

καθωσ συ, πατηρ, εν εμοι καγω εν σοι, ινα και αυτοι εν ημιν ωσιν ... εγω εν αυτοις και συ εν εμοι. The unity in itself of the Divine Triune God is opened up to include the human being, who is facing his or her God. This understanding of intimacy and inclusiveness is parallel to the parable of Jesus in John 15:4-7, “Abide in me as I abide in you neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them Whoever does not abide in me If you abide in me ...”
μεινατε εν εμοι, καγω εν υμιν ... υμεις εαν μη εν εμοι μενητε εγω ειμι η αμπελος, υμεις τα κληματα. ο μενων εν εμοι καγω εν αυτω εαν μη τισ μενη εν εμοι ...

Fourth question: How does our identification with Christ, the Son of Man, help us to understand the triune God’s opening up the Divine fellowship to us and includes us in the life of God?

16. Christ the mediator. One of the letters to the seven congregations, Revelation 3:20a, 22b are saying: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you ... Let anyone who has an ear *listen* to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Ιδου εστηκα επι την θυραν και κρουω. εαν τισ ακουση της φωνησ μου και ανοιξη την θυραν, εισελευσομαι προσ αυτον Ο εχων ουσ ακουσατω τι το πνευμα λεγει ταισ εκκλησιαις. In the inner individual dialog, searching and listening to one self to become your self, one more person is always there, listening, talking, knocking and opening up the Divine dimension.

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