

Sexism as Sin

Essential Spiritual Considerations

KYRIAKI KARIDOYANES FITZGERALD

This presentation offers some initial considerations from an Orthodox spiritual perspective regarding the sin of sexism. While Orthodox would no doubt often agree with many outside our tradition in identifying a given situation as a case of sexism, how we understand the nature of this sin may differ because of our differing theological and spiritual assumptions. Thus it is important for us to reflect more deeply on this sin from the perspective of our own theology – which may in turn influence our response to it.

During the final discussions of the Damascus meeting, the participants strongly urged that the topic of sexism be introduced and considered from an Orthodox spiritual perspective and suggested that I deliver this presentation at the Istanbul meeting. What is offered here can of course only scratch the surface. It takes the form of a personal evaluation, drawing on my own spiritual formation and Orthodox theological training, as well my experience as a pastoral counsellor and licenced psychologist.

Being as communion

It can be said that the Orthodox view existence or reality in terms of “being as communion”.¹ Reality is established by a God who is both one and triune, a God who himself lives in sublime community “without confusion” among the three Persons, “yet one in essence”, Father, Son and Spirit. Each Person of the uncreated Trinity abides eternally in the other in an ecstatic “dance” of loving surrender. In Greek, this is frequently referred to as *perichoresis*.

In a creaturely manner, we have this same vocation for living communion with God. This is because human persons are created in the divine “image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26). This communion consists of at least two realities: (1) a call to grow in the mystery of becoming unique human persons, a process which is particular to each human being and is

therefore unrepeatable; and (2) a call towards the infinite depths of intimacy with God. Some would see these two elements of our vocation as contradicting each other: the Orthodox, however, pointing to the uncreated Trinity, would affirm that each leads and bears witness to the other. Because of this “theanthropic” reality, we are also created to grow in communion with each other as human persons.

Through this paradox, Orthodox theology and spirituality essentially teach that everything in creation ultimately depends on *authentic relationships*. The “good news” of the unfathomable love of God, expressed through the Lord’s incarnation, ministry, passion, death, resurrection and bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, healed the ancient schism between God and humanity. The essential understanding of this rift is expressed through the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the first human sin, which consisted fundamentally of a willful choice towards unauthentic relationships. Adam and Eve “fell” because they chose to live “independently”. They chose to live out of communion with true Life and Reality. They wanted to be god without God. The Orthodox understand “original sin” not as the inheritance of the “guilt” of Adam and Eve, but as the inheritance of distorted relationships, which misdirect humanity away from authentic life with God, with other human persons and creation.

Because of the “Good News”, the consequences of this rift can be healed through the establishment and cultivation of authentic relationships. How we “stand before” God (*proseuche*) through *every* relationship and aspect of our daily lives, including our personal and community worship, expresses our response to the divine call to authentic relationship. As this is founded in God, potential growth in this dynamic is without end. Here we recall the famous words of St Athanasius: “God became a human person, so that the human person may become divine.” Writing in the late second century, St Irenaeus says: “Not only in this present age but also in the age to come, God will always have something more to teach the human person and the human person will always have something more to learn from God.”²

We are on a journey on which the living God has invited us to ever greater depths of communion. The further we travel this direction, the more the divinely established personal mystery within us begins to express itself and the more we “know” God, “bear” God and become filled with God. The full experience of this relationship with God is called *theosis* or, in English, “glorification” or “deification”. Again and again, human persons experience the mercy and gifts of the loving God. Both consciously and (more often) unconsciously, these persons begin to bear witness to this process in every aspect of their relationships with

others and creation. This deepening communion with God shines through their intentions, thoughts, words and actions, indeed, through their very presence.

These holy persons, the saints, who live in healthy communion with God, can best speak for God. It is to them that St Paul was referring when he wrote, "Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny" (1 Cor. 2:15). As participants in what the Orthodox call "the uncreated glory of God in Christ" they become "the only authorities within the Orthodox church".³ In other words, those human persons who have the final authority in the church are those same men and women who have been glorified and have become the saints of God. There is no higher honour or vocation than this in the church. It is a call extended to all.

Spiritual assumptions: setting priorities

After this very brief theological orientation, it is important to note here that a *thorough* investigation of the sin of sexism, or any other sin for that matter, is impossible, because doing so would entail engaging the sin in a manner that is dangerous to human persons. Trying to define this sin from God's perspective is a case of the sin of pride – the desire to be god without God. When we judge the sins of others while we are in a state of pride, we run the risk of leading a military campaign to remove the speck from the eye of our brother or sister while ignoring the log in our own. We become "spiritual terrorists". Authentic relationships with God, other human persons and creation cannot exist under these circumstances.

From a spiritual perspective, this sort of campaign may eventually direct us away from our own calling to full human personhood. This is typically marked by a growing inner hardness and lack of compassion, often expressed towards those who are nearest to us. Sometimes this takes the shape of self-righteous judgmentalism or fundamentalism, sometimes indifference or cynicism. For some people, this inner hardening leads to a tragic form of delusion which either rejects the holy altogether or considers oneself as the sole arbiter of holiness.

Any uncritical, undiscerning search for justice can easily entice us away from seeking the "one thing necessary" (Luke 10:42). Almost no one is immune to these temptations. Far too many of us ignore or even betray our own call to holiness and friendship with God as a result of trying to do God's work for him. From this wrong foothold, we run the risk of idolatry. We make an idol of our own conceptions of reality. Soon we ourselves become the oppressors. Rather than seeking to express the will of the Giver of life, we become agents of effacing the life of others.

Ensnared by the very trap we have set for others, we become less than human.

The antidote to this is rather simple. At the root of all of our personal actions, a conscious, peaceful yet discerning and critical spirit is necessary. This is because, as Orthodox theology stresses, any and all sin is bigger than we are. Nevertheless, the Christian good news is that the love of God is far greater than any and all sin.

Putting an end to denial

The sin of sexism, however, does clearly exist. And while we must avoid playing God in our analysis of this sin, we are still bound to unconditional honesty in naming it when we discern that it is occurring, including in our own selves. The prerequisite for naming this and any sin is putting an end to denial.

This is much more difficult than it sounds. Denial may take the form of a complete inability to accept the existence of a sin. If the sin does not exist, then the world is as it should be. Furthermore, if this sin does not exist, then the messenger must be the problem. Denial may also take the form of a partial admission of its existence, which minimizes the ramifications of this sin through ingenious rationalization. In this case, both message and messenger are trivialized. While this partial admission may seem preferable to no acknowledgment at all, it has the same effect of promoting the sin. Wherever the desire to engage the full light of truth is absent, sin will fester in the darkness. Orthodox spirituality teaches that sin is particularly at home with half-truths.

In recent years, I have come to believe that dealing with the sin of sexism is ultimately a matter of life and death. Its presence and effects are insidious and pervasive; and even the visible damage it inflicts on persons is incalculable. Boys and girls, men and women frequently suffer life-long, crippling losses as a result of this sin. And when this sin is active, yet its presence is denied outright or minimized, it gains power and momentum.

Piercing through pride and "hardness of heart"

Sexism is virtually never active alone. It is usually combined with and feeds on a cluster of other sins. The first of these is pride, which as we saw is essentially the desire to be god without God. Pride is immediately associated with other sins: the urge to grasp, control and destroy (manipulation), envy, the insatiable lust for power, glory and honour.

Typically, sexism is also accompanied by the condition Orthodox spirituality calls "hardness of heart". The heart here refers to something much deeper than the physical heart or the romantic connotations of the

word or even its use to refer to the base of human emotions. Simply stated, the heart for the Orthodox is the seat of our highest priorities. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21).

Through the heart, the human person grows in communion with God and others. It is essentially through the heart that one is established in humility. It is important not to confuse humility with humiliation – the destructive devaluation of the human person which promotes inauthentic relationships. The shame experienced through humiliation is typically used as a weapon of psychic violence which devastates the soul. While theology teaches that the soul is created to be immortal, humiliation and shaming may be experienced as "soul murder".

True humility occurs when one discovers what is most real: that one's existence and all creation ultimately depend on the love of the living God. Humble persons are deeply "grounded" in this reality; indeed, the Latin root of this word refers to the ground or mud of the earth. The term implies that genuinely humble persons are profoundly aware of what and who they are. They are whole human persons who relate with other human persons in a manner which leaves room for the mystery of God to take precedence within their relationship. Both men and women, equally, are called to be humble in this manner.

"Hardness of heart" refers specifically to the deadening of our deep inner awareness and connection with God, as well as with human beings and creation. Pride and hardness of heart work together symbiotically to affect how persons perceive, act, feel and respond to reality. If God is "frozen out" of our heart, we will also be unable to see or relate authentically with other human beings, creation or even our own selves. Because these "frozen" places cannot be felt from within, persons whose hearts are hard and choose evil often believe they are justified. They truly have no "sense" of what they are doing (cf. Luke 23:34).

On those relatively rare occasions when a person perceives his or her own inner frozen places, it is often as a result of realizing that he or she has inflicted serious harm on another. This may lead to repentance, *metanoia*, a complete change of heart and mind which reflects a thaw in the frozen heart. Short of *theosis*, all human persons have places in their hearts which are frozen or hard. These vary according to our own unique personal history, relationships, inadequacies, sin and, most of all, relationship with God.

The spiritual effects of sexism

Sexism ultimately depends on pride and hardness of heart in order to exist. It is an expression of inauthentic relating based on gender. Sexism is usually subtle. Whether through action or lack of action, the person

who is the object of this abuse is reduced to less than fully human from the perspective of the offender. In other words, the victim is de-personalized and objectified. A human-based "relative value" is projected onto the person, and the offender locks the intended victim into this definition, taking no account of how the living God may truly see and value the victim.

From the perspective of the offender, there is no possibility of an authentic relationship with the intended victim, let alone of transformation (*theosis*). There is a profound absence of true humility here. Betrayal and defiance are at the foundation of all sexism, as it is built on the refusal to acknowledge the divinely given and unique "mystery" of another human being. And so in one act, both God and human person are defied and betrayed. This has physical, psychological, social and spiritual ramifications. All too often, this dynamic may develop into ongoing psychological, physical, economic or sexual intimidation and violence, as the perpetrator is in a more powerful position than the victim.

While not necessarily feeling it, the perpetrator is spiritually "frozen". The offender may even be quite content and distracted, persistently chasing rewards thought to lead to self-aggrandizement and worldly success. While this creates its own kind of addictive excitement, the abuser is actually a stranger to the love of God.

This is as true in the so-called secular world as in the religious world. What is different in the world of the church is the profound level of betrayal experienced. When the abuser is a member of the clergy or a leader in the church, the survivor of the abuse often experiences a double betrayal: by the offender and also by God. Typically, the community and the religious leadership fail the survivor. Lacking discernment, they uncritically seek to defend "the ministry". This adds further insult to the most profound of betrayals already experienced by the survivor. In recent years, organizations and ministries have been formed which seek to address the healing of persons and communities affected by this kind of pain.⁴

Sexism subdues and enslaves the other; indeed, enslavement may perhaps be described as the ultimate goal of sexism. It is little wonder that ancient descriptions of young girls and women (and often young boys and men) being "sold into slavery", from pre-Christian times and in the early centuries of Christianity, implied a life of coerced prostitution, devoid of human dignity. They were seen as commodities of relative value.

Think also of how the religious leaders in many of the gospel stories treated others, especially those in apparently weaker positions – the ill, the destitute, women. Women were not treated as persons bearing the

same “image and likeness of God” as they. Instead, an arbitrary value was ascribed to them and then, de-personalized and devalued, they could be manipulated for selfish purposes.

The gospel story recounted in John 8:2-11 demonstrates how the religious leaders of the day trapped and used a woman caught in sin as a way to bait Jesus, simultaneously attacking authentic relationships towards both God and a human person. It is worthy of note that according to the biblical account, before Jesus proclaimed the “orthodoxy” of who he was, he first stopped to rescue and restore the woman. The story ends by depicting the woman departing as a friend of God. The Lord’s response indicates that God sees affronts against himself and against other humans – women as well as men – as part of the same reality (cf. Matt. 22:37-39).

From a spiritual perspective, sexism is a delusion. It is not based in reality – the will and love of God. But the life-effacing dynamic of sexism can unfortunately take on a kind of life of its own. Survivor and offender alike may live entirely under the sway of this powerful form of “intoxication”. Whether this assumes the form of a complete or partial denial of the existence of this sin, it fails to give glory to God and bears witness to “another gospel”, whose message inflicts its own “hardening of the heart” within the unique personal history of the victim. This is then internalized in the psyche of the survivor and may be expressed in a number of ways, often resulting in some form of coping, withdrawal or escape mechanism, so as to help protect the victim from further humiliation and pain.

Sexism in daily life

Sexism thus seeks to undermine the sense of personhood of the targeted individual by aiming to break the person’s will and sense of God-given dignity. As this person is held in some form of contempt by the offender, attempts to reform a hardened abuser are frequently met with denial, even aversion. Moreover, within this inauthentic relationship, the free will of the less powerful person usually diminishes. This is not surprising, for the survivor has entered the deluded domain of the more powerful offender. Nevertheless, free will can never disappear completely. There are even occasions when the intended victim cannot be ensnared, usually after the person has already experienced some healing. I have seen this in a number of instances, but it normally requires an extensive degree of personal healing.

We must bear in mind that this humiliating, life-effacing dynamic also occurs in many other relationships in which the more powerful can manipulate the less powerful. Parents abuse their children, husbands

exploit their wives (or wives may abuse their husbands), teachers mistreat their students, clergy betray those in their care, bosses exploit their staff, the politically powerful oppress the weak, the rich exploit the poor. In all these situations, the more powerful person is blind to the mystery of the person “over whom” they have authority.

Many observers have pointed to the way in which human-based institutional and cultural structures are used as vehicles to oppress weaker members of a society, including women. When oppression is built into structures, the accountability of colluding individuals is blurred, as they too are over-powered to some extent by the delusion within the system and may easily become spiritually “frozen” to the reality of the will and love of God. Instead, many may burrow themselves more deeply into such a system in order to hide from this fact. Or they may seek rewards from the system as a means of escape from truth.

When combatting life-effacing “structures”, it is very easy to become “frozen”. This happens when we become identified with the system’s process of analysis and lose our orientation and grounding in reality – the will and love of God. As in the fall of Adam and Eve, we seek to become god without God. As stated above, authentic relationships with God, other human persons and creation cannot exist under such circumstances. Under these circumstances, the liberators of today become the oppressors of tomorrow. It requires discernment to “fight the good fight” (2 Tim. 4:7) against evil forces while staying grounded in the “one thing necessary” (Luke 10:42).

The most common form of sexism in contemporary society is that directed against women. It may be committed by men or women. Psychological studies have classified the differences between men’s sexism against women and women’s sexism against women. Briefly, while the abuse towards the intended victim may seem similar, the former tends to be rooted in contempt towards “the other gender”, while the latter tends to direct the contempt inwardly, towards “the self: body and soul”.⁵

These disordered relationships between women and men affect both in differing yet profound ways. Let me here offer four brief observations about the sexism directed by men against women.

The first of these has to do with what is perhaps the most obvious case, in which sexism causes inauthentic relationships with women presently in a man’s life. He projects certain pre-determined assumptions onto women which diminish or ignore the mystery of their person, their dignity and their God-given vocation. Typically, various strategies of shaming are used to coerce compliance. This dynamic extends itself to expectations of the roles of women in the home, society and the church. Projected onto women with little or no discernment, these assumptions

may keep women – and the relationship between the man and women – locked into a human-based and hence “fallen” pattern. Sadly, this may also lock out the will of God for the relationship. The dominant culture may foster such “fallen” relationships in numerous subtle ways, maintaining assumptions regarding human relationships which may have little to do with the will of God.

Second, when men de-personalize the other gender through sexist attitudes and actions, a subtle but very deep damage may be occurring within them as well. Professional psychotherapists and counsellors recognize that dynamics from significant past and present relationships with men and women are often deeply internalized in the human psyche. These inner relationships are reflected in the quality of our external relationships as well.

But how does a man grow as a human being if he has only faulty inner feminine images and memories? How does this affect one’s maturing sense of masculinity? Certain approaches to psychology have found that when a man has immature associations with internalized feminine relationships or the “feminine”, his masculinity suffers reciprocally. This rejection of the “other” deep within him now sabotages his own masculinity.

This may have serious ramifications in terms of his spiritual life as it is understood in the Orthodox tradition. This leads to a third concern: how the saints of the church are approached. I have been to churches where except for the Holy Mother of God, there were few or even *no* female saints depicted either on the iconostasis or in the frescoes on the walls. Icons of male saints were to be seen everywhere. How does this affect the male and female worshippers who attend divine services? What does this say about the vision of the leaders who selected the icons? What does it say about their understanding of the saints, of the nature of the church, even of paradise? Is it not possible that paradise may be made up of at least half women? Are not at least half of the saints women? How is the quality of one’s intercessions to the female saints, even to the Mother of God, affected when the presence and dignity of women are diminished not only in everyday life but also in church?

A fourth, more subtle concern is also raised. Assumptions about the Theotokos may arise which do not belong to the church. For example, it is not uncommon today to hear persons refer to the activities of Mary as though her mission were completed: she gave birth to God the Word out of obedience and has now earned her place in heaven. The implication is that all women should do likewise. On the basis of this static view, there is little room left for the activity of the Theotokos, women saints or even all the saints in the church. Why, then, do we Orthodox still pray to her? Why, for that matter, do we still pray to any of the saints?

It would profit us to reflect more deeply on why, through the ages, the church has testified through its prayers that this human being is “more honourable than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim”. Is her work completely over within the Body of Christ? What kind of a loving Mother would that be? What does this say about the quality of our relationship with the saints? What does this say about us?

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Obviously, this presentation has been able to present only some basic considerations for an Orthodox spiritual perspective on the sin of sexism. Still, these concerns do seek to express a theology which is healing and life-giving and testifies to the importance of authentic relationships. It is evident that more reflection is needed on ways to respond to the sin of sexism. Central to a discussion of the antidote to this sin may be the paradoxical yet powerful criteria of humility, freedom, purity of heart and discernment. The discipline (*askesis*) required for human persons to cultivate these will, with the help of God, develop over a lifetime. This effort will, first of all, facilitate a growing relationship with God. A teaching used by the Lord to identify his true disciples provides us with a small indication of the mystery of communion among the three persons of the Trinity, which has profound implications for the nurture of authentic relationships among all human persons, men and women, and for every human being with God: “the person who finds his life shall lose it; and the one who loses his life, for my sake, will find it” (Matt. 10:39).

NOTES

- ¹ Cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985.
- ² Cited in Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985, p.185.
- ³ Cf. John Romanides, “Church Synods and Civilization”, *Theologia*, Vol. 63, no. 3, July-Sept. 1992, pp.20-21.
- ⁴ In the USA the Inter-Faith Sexual Trauma Institute (ISTI) is one such organization. ISTI’s mission statement “affirms the goodness of human sexuality and advocates respectful relationships through the appropriate use of power within communities of all religious traditions. ISTI promotes the prevention of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment through research, education and publication. In areas of sexuality, ISTI offers leadership, gives voice and facilitates healing to survivors, communities of faith and offenders, as well as those who care for them.” Further information is available from the Office of the Executive Director; St John’s Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321, USA; and from ISTI’s site on the World Wide Web – <http://www.osb.org/isti>. A new Orthodox Internet ministry has also been established for “victims of abuse in the Orthodox church” – the “Protection of the Theotokos Survivors’ site”. The address is www.angelfire.com/bc/orthodoxsurvivors/index.html.
- ⁵ Sexism may also be expressed towards men by both men and women. Often this is linked with some form of chronic abuse. In my own clinical experience, I have observed women’s sexism towards men as initially expressed towards “the other”, while the sexism of men towards men appears to be expressed towards the “self”. Therapy would need to proceed differently in each of these general situations.