

Empathy and the 'Filioque'

When I introduce myself as an Orthodox Christian the particular theological differences from the Roman Catholic tradition that most people recall are Orthodoxy's lack of the Papacy and the non-use of the *filioque* in the Nicene Creed. In most people's minds their approach to both of these ideas is simply to ask, 'What difference does it make?'. I will not say anything here about the Papacy but want to look at what I see as a possible result of the unthinking use in the Creed of the *filioque*.

I have always disliked the use that is made of the word *empathy* but until now I have mistakenly regarded it as derived from Greek; and meaning 'to feel within'. However consulting a modern dictionary, I found that it is a back formation from the German *Einfühlung*, meaning 'one feeling'. It just appears to be Greek, to be used in conjunction with *sympathy* which is from the Greek.

My primary objection to *empathy* has always been that it denies the individuality of the other person and so is a non-Christian concept. The discovery of the word's invention by German speaking psychologists in the nineteenth century made me look again at how such a concept of *one* person experiencing emotions identical to those of another could have come about. The Austrian/German region is the source of the Protestant Reformation three centuries earlier. One of the things that happened with the Protestant Reformation was its unthinking taking over of the western form of the Creed with the *filioque*. Taken to its philosophical extreme the *filioque* accepts that two persons can have an identical relationship with another.[?] This may not seem serious. How many people take things to a logical extreme? This happens more often than we might suppose. We all know of the "What if?" scenarios. How this cause us to hypothesise, and, before we know where we are, we have reached an extreme position.

If then the *filioque* is accepted without question, then the seed of there being identical relationships with another person is sown, then the *Einfühlung* of the German psychologists is seen as perfectly reasonable. This gets exported in a pseudo-scientific format and is taken on by people everywhere.

The word *empathy* or its nearest equivalent in modern Greek means 'antipathy or hatred' towards the other person, not 'compassion' or 'sympathy'. In the Bible the concept of *empathy* is totally absent. What is there are the feelings of *compassion*; *pity* and *sympathy*, most commonly *compassion*; and that is found most frequently in the books of Psalms, Isaiah and Jeremiah and only rarely in the New Testament. Compassion is seen as a quality of God and it is to be imitated by men in their striving to be perfect *as their 'Father in heaven is perfect'*.

Compassion is of course derived from the Latin; *sympathy* from the Greek. They mean suffering with or alongside, the Greek prefix *syn* carrying the same meaning as the Latin *co-*, (*com-*). It is this *co-suffering* which is the important concept, the *kenosis*, that complete self-emptying so that one is able to endure with the other person and share in their suffering but not take away their individuality.

The worst excess of the *filioque* is the depersonalisation of the Holy Spirit, in the same way that the excess of *empathy* is the taking away the personhood of the other. When I hear anyone using the word *empathy* I hope that they know what they are saying. Often though the impression is given that they are merely using the jargon of the age and are copying Humpty Dumpty's; "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean." This Humpty Dumpty use of words perpetuates and even legitimises the heresies of our forefathers and so the acceptance of identical relationships made possible / respectable through the unthinking acceptance of the *filioque* is introduced into the professional life of Orthodox Christians.

Empathy is not a concept I find helpful. No-one knows, or can know, how I feel, but what they can do is have sympathy with my situation and be a co-worker-out of my problem. Any one who claims *empathy* with me makes me run a mile. They can't know how I feel, and to me what they are doing is accepting a dangerous heresy that denies the individuality of the persons, just as the *filioque* tends to deny the individuality of the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity.

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