



WHERE IS GOD'S SPACE?

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Is there a God "out there"? God is "everywhere present and filling all things," we say in our Orthodox prayers, but is He "out there?" For what it's worth, I want to suggest for a moment that *He is not*. Largely, what I am describing is what takes place in our imagination – that is, what we picture when we pray and how we think of God as we seek Him.

There are, to my mind, two primary ways of thinking and speaking about God. One is "juridical," the other "ontological." Juridical relationships are largely how we imagine relationships in our modern culture. We think of ourselves as individuals with rights and obligations, with a series of demands made on us by others and on others by us. The rules and laws of our society govern these forces. For us – everybody and everything is "out there." Thomas Hobbes, writing during the years of the English Civil War, described this as the "war of all against all." He opined that only a strong government could manage such a state of nature.

"Ontological" means "having to do with *being*." My relationship with myself is ontological. I am not "out there" from myself. In the modern imagination, that is where ontology stops. There is my existence ("in here") and everything else and everyone else is "out there." The war goes on.

This is a deeply inadequate view of life. Consider the relationship we have with our parents. We are, quite literally, "bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh." We share a biological reality that is itself our existence. This can be extended towards other human beings. We never(!) exist alone. We can be "considered" alone for the purposes of study and the like, but we are no more alone than any of the cells within our bodies. We are *social* beings, but social in a manner that has to do with our very being and not merely with juridical arrangements.

The story of Joseph Stalin's death is an interesting case in point. His exercise of brutal force on all those around him (including members of his own family) was a triumph of juridical ideology. As he lay dying (so the story goes), no one goes to his aid. There is too much fear. In the end, relationships that are shaped along purely juridical lines fail to give life. Indeed, they foster death.

St. Silouan said, "My brother is my life." Nothing better states the ontological character of our existence. If my brother is my life, however, what is this space between us? An image that comes to mind is leaves on a tree. The life of every leaf depends on the life of every other leaf, just as all leaves depend on the life of the tree. The "space" between the leaves exists only in an imaginary manner. They are connected

in a single life. The life of one is the life of all.

The space between is part of our modern imagination. The language of rights, for example, seeks to assert connectedness by juridical means, but only increases the emptiness of the space between. It is little wonder that this juridical imagery, when turned towards God, fails to nurture the soul. What we know of "out there" is always surrounded with uncertainty and anxiety. The juridical depends, ultimately, on violence. We can only "make" ("force") things to bridge the empty space between us. And, of course, the space remains empty, regardless.

The modern paradigm, composed of juridical relationships, is the mother of loneliness, teaching our hearts that they exist in a fragmented world of temporary, negotiated cease-fires in an otherwise war-of-all-with-all. The language of rights, rooted primarily in older warrior cultures of Northern Europe, have given us our world of contracts, but never a world of true being.

God is not "out there" in the sense imagined by the juridical mind. At its very heart, "everywhere present and filling all things" means that there can be no "out there" with regard to God. God is only "here." The Scriptures commonly describe God as dwelling "in us." St. Paul describes our bodies as "temples of the Holy Spirit." The language of Holy Baptism is not one of establishing a juridical relationship. It is the language of *union*, as is the language of the Holy Eucharist: Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him (John 6:56).

All of this can easily remain little more than an intellectual distinction. My conversations over the years, however, tell me that our juridical imagination dominates how we see God. We long for a relationship with One who is "out there," while remaining oblivious to the God who dwells in us. In a recent conversation with a young convert who was struggling with a sense of God's absence, I said, "But you breathe Him!"

Life (and existence in all forms) has been reduced to science-facts, objects or properties of objects. In truth, all things have their existence in God (not in themselves). We live in a creation that was brought into being out of nothing – it has no being in and of itself. From an Orthodox perspective, the existence of *anything* is proof of the existence of God.

We recognize, however, an even greater union within human beings. Of us alone, it is said that

God *breathed* into us and we became living souls. To know God is also to know oneself – and, we may say, we cannot know ourselves apart from God, for there is no such self.

Of all the writers in Scripture, the one who says the most about problems of being, existence, connectedness and such, is St. John. And, for St. John, the key within all of these things is love. Consider this classic statement:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

“...if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” This is the language of mutual indwelling that has no place within a juridical model of relationships. God *is* love. Indeed, in this passage there is a consistent blending of action and being. God not only does (He loves us) but He is what He does (God is love).

This manner of being is the image according to which we are created. Love constitutes our true being. “My brother is my life.” This is more than a moral statement: it is a reflection on the very nature of true existence. For this reason, the “space between,” must be seen as a delusional artifact of the juridical imagination. We are created to exist as love – love of God, love of the other, love of self. When we withdraw from the love of God and the love of other, then the love of self collapses into a solipsistic loneliness. Sadly, we have frequently structured the modern world to accommodate and promote the lonely self. Our neighborhoods, our cities, our mode of transportation, our world of entertainment and consumption thrive on the lonely self and seek to fill the space between. However, you cannot fill emptiness with emptiness.

“Out there” is “in here.”

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The photo shows, "The Eternal Father," by Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), painted in 1646.

