SELF-IDENTITY AND CYBERSPACE CHALLENGES: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN WEST ASIAN SYRIAC TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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Abstract

This essay draws from the wisdom of the Syriac tradition to address problems and trends in contemporary society. Particularly the moral and spiritual challenges raised by the all-encompassing category of virtual reality. More specifically, I am interested in showing how a modern appropriation of the wisdom in my own tradition regarding the complementary relation of faith and reason, or religion and science, might help solve what I consider to be core worldwide issues that go to the heart of what it means to be human. I am especially interested in the question of self-identity, sexual identity, the sexual revolution, the relation between sexuality and spirituality, and the apparently growing so-called "addictive" epidemic on internet pornography.

Beginning[1] in the sixth century, and continuing well into the seventh, an explosion of philosophical insight occurred as a result of an extremely dynamic synthesis that can rightly be described as emerging from the religious culture in West Asia. Syriac speaking Christians, heirs to Mesopotamian and Jewish culture, living primarily in the regions of what are today Lebanon, Syria and southeast Turkey, began to translate, develop, and transmit ancient Greek thought and culture into Syriac. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the great Arab translators, under the patronage of the 'Abassid Islamic dynasty, and in conjunction with these Syriac speaking Christians, who also knew Arabic and had begun to assimilate Islamic-Arabic culture as well, began to translate this great and living heritage from Syriac into Arabic, thereby not only transmitting the ancient

Greek wisdom, but substantially developing it. This latter stage, because of the geographical, political and economic realities at that time, also received the insights and wisdom of Persian, Indian, and (later during the Mongolian period) Chinese thought, culture and religion, making this period one of the most dynamic cultural and philosophical interchanges in history. The philosophical and civilizational result was dynamic and long lasting, providing both the solid foundation and building materials for the further construction of what would come to be known as modern science and civilization, once texts were brought to Spain via northern Africa and translated into Latin via Castilian in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Even a cursory examination of what may rightly be called Arabic philosophy, (in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims all participated in developing) reveals that the fundamental impetus at the heart of this philosophical and cultural exchange was a religious one, overwhelming concerned with reconciling scientific insights with the similar versions of revelation contained in the Holy texts. These scientific insights were not merely the scientific achievements of Greek science transmitted to the West via Syriac and Arabic, in the precise form they were received, but, as stated above, were substantially developed by Oriental Syriac speaking Christians, and then by Arab and Persian Muslims and Jews, aided to some extent, by insights from Indian and then later (in the Mongolian period) Chinese religious cultures. The crucial point here is that in the process of transmitting Greek science, those Jews, Christians, and Muslims concerned with reconciling science and revelation, actually moved the scientific and philosophical project forward; their concern to reconcile their religious truths with scientific truths did not hold science or philosophy back, but propelled it forward. With respect to natural science, the new achievements included "a far more advanced number theory and algebra, a new system of trigonometry, a medical corpus much greater than that available in the Greek world, and an entirely original theory of optics more powerful than anything known to the Greeks and that was not only to form the mathematical basis for the Renaissance art but also to inspire new directions in scientific practice".[2] With respect to the philosophical achievements, there were notable advances in ontology and epistemology; questions about whether the world was eternal or created in

time pushed the ontological project forward, whereas questions concerning the existence of necessary causes in nature stimulated epistemological discussion. And, again, the West Asian, Syriac speaking Christian culture played a crucial role in these great advancements in philosophy and science, precisely because they were a bridge-building culture open to knowledge and wisdom from wherever it came.

I am tempted to spend more time expatiating on the ancient glory of my own West Asian Syriac heritage, but since we have been advised precisely *not* to do this and to focus rather on showing how the worldviews, principles, cultural values, and ethical norms that we have inherited from our own traditions can help to handle the problems of modern society and contribute to its future greatness, I shall resist the temptation and enter directly into my subject, which concerns the moral and spiritual challenges raised by the all-encompassing category of virtual reality. More specifically, I am interested in showing how a modern appropriation of the wisdom in my own tradition regarding the complementary relation of faith and reason, or religion and science, which has ramifications for the body/mind or body/soul problem, might help solve what I consider to be core worldwide issues that go to the heart of what it means to be human. I am especially interested in the question of self-identity, sexual identity, the sexual revolution, the relation between sexuality and spirituality, and the apparently growing so-called "addictive"[3] epidemic[4] of cyberspace pornography. Admittedly, this is far too much to address in a twenty minute presentation, but I hope at least to sketch the broad outlines of both the major problem and possible solutions.

The question of self-identity is quintessentially a modern one that emerges with the breakdown of agricultural, village-based, community life–a way of living which, we are apt to forget, was the dominant way of life for most of human history.[5] The question rarely arises, if ever, in societies wherein one's own identity is immediately evident in one's *relations* to the family, the village, the tribe, the clan, and the land. We do find, of course, the Polis in the ancient world, but those who lived in cities still maintained close ties to family, village, tribe, clan, and ancestral land. With the emergence of the modern city, and the radical shift from agriculture to industry, both of which are the result of paradigmatic shifts in epistemology, whereby knowledge came to be defined by the scientific

method of the natural sciences, and wherein the *telos* of knowledge was to *master* nature, the question of self-identity takes on new and confusing proportions. I do not want to overstate the point, because even a cursory perusal of Western and Eastern literature in ancient and medieval times shows that human beings have always asked perennial probing questions such as "who am I?" "What is beyond death?" "Why do we suffer?" But my point is that with the breakdown of communal, religious, and agricultural life, and with the advent of modern science and society, the traditional answers to these questions have difficulty penetrating, and thus satisfying, the human soul in its quest for meaning. To use the terminology of a great contemporary Western philosopher, Charles Taylor, the modern self has become a buffered self, rather than, as in previous times, a porous self. I cannot defend this bold thesis here, as it is an astoundingly long and tremendously complex story,[6] but the idea is that when the natural world (or nature[7]) is seen as a separate object divorced from the human subject, something to be manipulated and mastered for the material benefit of the human being, then we lose our natural place in the real world. Seeking a home, we create a virtual reality that brings with it a plethora of exceedingly complex ontological problems, not the least of which is self-alienation wherein the problem of self-identity, which necessarily includes the problem of sexual identity, since we are sexual beings by nature, comes to the fore. I do not want to suggest that this is an entirely new problem, but because of the unprecedented technological mastery of nature, the problem becomes more pronounced and dangerous, and the degree of self-isolation deeper and deeper. Such isolation is the most profound kind of poverty, much worse and more serious than material poverty, of which often times it is the cause. In this state of individualistic isolation, we are prevented from satisfying our natural yearning to have fruitful relations with the earth, with other animals, with mother and father and with an extended community of all ages, young and old. This ultimately affects our ability as adults to have healthy and fruitful relationships with members of the opposite sex, a perennial problem, of course, but one that is compounded by the ability to objectivize the other, as a mere object of pleasure–a special, intimate, and powerful kind of pleasure that is meant to be connected in an intense way to life, children, meaningful relationship, responsibility, and dignity. This ability to imme-

diately objectify another through the medium of a computer screen at the touch of a button in order to *know* another intimately without knowing them at all, does not satisfy the natural yearning to love and be loved, but frustrates and distorts it, so that one must continually go back for more and more until, as many pornography "addicts" admit, they hit rock bottom, namely, an attraction to what was previously unthinkable: incest, rape, murder, and suicide. Listening to the recent testimony of former porn-stars, Shelly Leubben and Trent Roe, confirms these claims to some degree.[8]

I am not claiming that all pornography leads to such radical violence; some research shows that soft pornography can even be related to reduction in sexual violence, as it becomes a relatively harmless and disease free outlet for sexual frustration, and, furthermore, because it is usually private, it brings little risk of public shame or embarrassment. Not only that, some sex therapists use various forms of soft pornography to help couples grow into sexually satisfying relationships, although the success rate of such methods is highly disputed. Sexual frustration is not a new phenomenon, of course, as the so-called "oldest profession" of prostitution attests. In fact, one could even say it is as necessary to a society as an efficient waste disposal system is, analogy intended. St. Augustine said as much. But, again, because of the radically objectifying essence of sexually deviant behavior in the world of virtual reality, the long term effects are more complex and potentially more dangerous, precisely because of the virtual nature of the activity, which allows the creation of worlds that have nothing to do with reality, and therefore, nothing to do with what Aristotle called the transcendentals of reality or being, the good, the true, and the beautiful. When one has relations with a real prostitute in person, one is confronted with the fact that he or she is relating to a real person, not an object, even if they are treating that person as an object. This makes the entire experience real, and thus has the potential of revealing the actual moral goodness or evil, truth or falsehood, beauty or ugliness of the activity, but with cybersex the full potential for discovering the reality and truth about the action is blurred and confused.[9] At any rate, whether virtual or not, when the special kind of human intimacy associated with sexual pleasure is packaged in such a way as to be consumed as one instant pleasure item among many, one could argue that it is

violent by its very nature in that it *violates* the very dignity and nature of the human person, even if it is entered into freely, not to mention when it is forced upon victims, which is quite often the case, and the fact that these victims are often times women and children reveals even further the violent and distorted nature of such activity.

Admittedly, there is almost no end to the analyses of such a complex phenomena, but I think I have sketched the broadest outlines of the problem for the purposes of this brief presentation anyhow. And, now, guided by the wisdom of my own West Asian Syriac tradition, I will try to present a short sketch of possible solutions by focusing on the dynamic and successful synthesis achieved during the Christian Patristic period between Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine regarding the role of the human body in the identity of the human being, a synthesis to which the Syriac fathers greatly contributed. The clash was between a Platonic body/soul, spirit/matter, dualism and the very different Jewish/Christian approach to the body. The latter sought to overcome the prevalent dualism by emphasizing the importance of the "heart" as the point of unity in human beings, as the "site of our most profound and basic orientation", that is to say, as the site of "our love".[10] The suggestion was that the body and soul meet, as it were, in the "heart", and only there do they find their unity, but only if the heart is *single-hearted*. St. Augustine's achieved anthropological synthesis in this regard with his "two loves", which was also "crucial to the development of Western political thought and the Christian theology of history",[11] is well known, what is less well known, but perhaps even more dynamic is the Syriac contribution here since this tradition was even more rooted in the Jewish tradition, which had already achieved a Semitic/Greek synthesis in the production of the Septuagint. St. Ephrem the Syrian of the early 4th century, in particular, strongly and effectively resisted the Greek body/soul dualism by depicting the body and soul as bride and bridegroom, who came together to consummate their love in the secret bedroom chamber of the *heart*. Eventually, this new Jewish/Christian anthropology, rooted in Ezekiel's heart stirring prophetic utterances concerning God's promise to create a new heart for his people in place of their heart of stone, came to rival the body/soul dualism of the pagan world, as more and more people, especially women,

came to the "heartfelt" conviction that *the body* was not alien to the soul, but indeed could be correctly thought of as the "masculine" bridegroom lovingly protecting, caring for, and even serving his bride, the "female" *soul*. This image totally turned the pagan notion upside down, wherein "the soul had been thought of as ruling the body with the same alert...authority as the well–born male ruled those inferior and alien to himself-his wife, his slaves, the populace of the city".[12] It is no wonder that many women from all walks of life were attracted to this biblical anthropology. Not only was St. Ephrem's message fresh and powerful, but the beauty of his method, primarily song and poetry, allowed the new anthropological insights to penetrate the social imaginary of an entire generation. In this regard, comparative studies of classical Syriac and Confucian thought and method would be interesting, especially in the light of the fact that the Syriac Christianity, which first entered China by 635 of the common era, during the Tang dynasty, was quick to construct a theological linguistic apparatus that borrowed from existing Chinese modes and expressions of thought. The Confucian emphasis on the "heart" as the very center and *unity* of the person, the key moral concept of *Jen*, which may be rendered into English as "human heartedness"; moreover, the centrality of the aesthetic element emphasizing music, rites, and songs as necessary for communicating Confucian moral and spiritual truths, are all present too in the Syriac tradition and the achieved anthropological synthesis which we have been discussing. When the Syriac Christian brought these views with them to China, they were only strengthened and complemented in Chinese culture. It seems a mutual complementary exchange took place. At any rate, this synthesis held strong till the modern period, when it was challenged anew by the Cartesian experiment and the Mechanical Philosophy of the seventeenth century, a challenge from which the West, where it originated, has never really recovered. One great advantage to most Asian thought, whether in its West or East Asian variant, is that Cartesianism, with its corresponding subject/object, body/soul, universal/singular, faith/reason, and religion/science dualisms, never really took root.

In conclusion, the direction we should be facing while searching for solutions to contemporary problems of self-identity, compounded by

the "old", new problem of virtual reality, is back. That is to say, back to our rich religious and cultural traditions, not in order to return to the past by embracing some kind traditional*ism*, while uncritically rejecting everything that came out of the Western enlightenment as flawed, but in order to recover age old truths that can help us go forward together towards, perhaps, a second enlightenment-where the sun of reality, and not virtually reality, shines upon us to bring us joy and to discover our true identity and place in this rapidly changing globalized world. Thank you.

Endnotes

[1]Some of the material appearing in this and the following paragraph has been published previously in *Prajñā Vihāra: The Journal of Philosophy and Religion,* Assumption University of Thailand, Volume 9, No. 2, July-December 2008, pp.10-11, though I have re-worked these 2 paragraphs for the purposes of the present paper.

[2]See Arun Bala's The Dialogue of Civilizations in the Birth of Modern Science (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2006) 53-54.

[3]Time does not permit to enter into a serious discussion of what constitutes addiction, sex addiction, or otherwise. There are many who argue plausibly that the very category of "addiction" lessons the real need for moral responsibility. When it comes to the complex issue of so-called sex addiction, there are a plethora of social, cultural, moral and religious variables to consider, and not all of these can be considered according to a strict scientific empirical method. Whether sex addiction is to be classified as an obsessive-compulsive disorder or hypersexual disorder is a matter of debate because the very category of "disorder" is still debated by serious psychologists. Deep philosophical analysis that brings together ontology, ethics, and anthropology is needed to shed more light on these complex issues. At the very least, I would argue that any activity that is cut off from its ultimate "purpose" is to be considered a disorder. With respect to sexual activity, the ultimate purpose, though not the only one, is procreation.

[4]Whether this phenomenon is a worldwide epidemic is unclear since statistics are difficult to come by, but there is evidence that it has reached epidemic proportions in the U.S., but, again, conclusions depend on a precise definition of addiction. A recent article in Newsweek (December 5, 2011) reports that "[a]n estimated 40 million people a day in the U.S. log on to some 4.2 million pornographic websites, according to the Internet Filter Software Review". (p.56). Also the work of Craig Gross & Steven Luff, *Pure Eyes: a man's guide to sexual integrity* (Grand Rapids: 2010), provides some evidence that cyberspace sex addiction has indeed become an epidemic in the U.S. For an international perspective on the issue, see the work of Tami VerHelst, Vice President of the International Institute for Trauma and Addic-

tion Professionals.

[5]Glenn Olsen, *The Turn to Transcendence: The Role of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

[6]Even Charles Taylor's one thousand page tome, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), which is the best and most comprehensive work in English when it comes to documenting and explaining the sources of this buffered self, is, as he himself admits, only part of the story.

[7]See Pierre Hadot's *The Veil of Isis: An Essay On the History of the Idea of Nature* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), for one of the best and most thoroughgoing contemporary accounts of what "nature" has meant in the history of Western thought. Beginning with the Presocratics, Hadot traces the meaning of "nature" up till modern times and presents 7 different accou[8]While very sympathetic to, and supportive of, the action on the part of courageous people like Roe and Leubben, who as ex-porn stars now speak out strongly against pornography, my impression is that their arguments would have a wider appeal if they were more developed philosophically, rather than theologically. This is not to downplay the power and authenticity of their conversions to "born-again Christianity" but simply to point out that their valuable insights into the evil of pornography are often times dismissed in the public sphere because of this association.

[9]It is interesting to recall here the various "theologies of evil" in many of the world's great religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions, which identifies evil as just falling "short of full being"–a negation of something rather than something in itself–some kind of half or virtual reality tending towards non-being.

[10]Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 276.

[11]Pope Benedict XVI's February 20, 2008, General Audience in Paul VI's Audience Hall on the life and thought of St. Augustine; the idea is presented in Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, composed in 22 books between 413 and 426 of the common era. See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080220_en.html.

[12]Charles Taylor quotes Peter Brown's *The Body and Society* here. See page 276 of the *Secular Age* and footnote 10 on page 805.