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Part 1 of the interview with Archimandrite Dionysios, Orthodox elder from Mount Athos and a modern mystic. Interview by Craig Hamilton. For background see the introduction also published on WRITERSite.

The Enemy Within (1)

INTERVIEWER (Craig Hamilton): What is the ego?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: When Satan, who was the first and highest angel, looked away from God and turned his attention to himself, there we had the first seed of ego. He took his spiritual eyes from the view of the Holy Trinity, the view of the Lord, and he looked at himself and started to think about himself. And he said, "I want to put my throne in the highest place, and to be like Him." That moment started the history, the reality and the existence of ego—which is not in fact a reality, but the refusal of reality. Ego is the flower that comes out from the death of love. When we kill love, the result is the ego.

INTERVIEWER: What is the character of the ego? How does it manifest within a human being?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: When we don't trust. Ego is born when we don't trust others. When we're afraid of others, when we need guns against others, then we need to have an ego because we are in the wrong way of life. We think only of ourselves, and we see only our ego. But when we see each other, when we trust each other, there is no need for ego, no reason for ego, no possibility for ego.

INTERVIEWER: So in the way you're speaking about it then, ego is the insistence on our separation, our independence?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: Yes, on our solitude. Our need to be alone, to have our own way of thinking that satisfies us and preserves our personality in the wrong way.

INTERVIEWER: Putting ourselves first and foremost?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: Yes. And Christ said, "The last is the first." Because when you want to be the last and you choose the last seat, only then may you call the others friends of yours.

INTERVIEWER: The ego, this sense of self-importance you've been speaking about, is often described in The Philokalia and other writings of the Christian mystics as the primary enemy with which the spiritual aspirant must wrestle in their quest for union with God. Why is the ego considered to be such a formidable adversary on the path?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: It is such a powerful enemy because it is the enemy within us. We are enemies to ourselves, like Adam and Eve in paradise. Of course, the snake talked to Eve. But she could have avoided him. The snake said to her, "The Lord lied to you," but if she would have trusted the Lord, she would not have started to talk to the snake. And Adam, too, lost his

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communication with the Lord and stayed with his ego. And the two egos worked together, Adam and Eve.

The real enemy is the ego. It is the enemy because it is against love. When I look at myself, I don't love others. When I want to occupy for myself what is yours, I become the killer of my brother, like Cain killed Abel. When I want to satisfy myself, this satisfaction is gained through sacrificing the freedom of the other. Then my ego becomes my lord, my god, and there is no stronger temptation than this. Because to us, this ego may seem like a diamond. It has a shine like gold. But whatever is shining is not gold. The ego is just like a fire without light, a fire without warmth, a fire without life. It seems that it has many sides and many possibilities—but what is this possibility? What is ego? Only the means by which I protect myself as if I were in a battle, as if every other person is my enemy, and the only thing I care about is winning the victory.

INTERVIEWER: It has been said by some of the greatest spiritual luminaries that when one takes up the spiritual path in earnest, one often comes face-to-face with the ego in a way that one never could have imagined previously. In describing their encounters with the ego, many saints have characterized it as an almost diabolical force within that does not want the spiritual life, that does not want God, but that wants to do everything it can to obstruct our illumination, to undermine our firm resolve to stay on the path.

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: Saint Paul writes beautifully about this event, this struggle inside the human heart. He says, "There is another law inside me telling me to refuse the will of God, to do things against Him, to refuse the grace. It tries to keep me in my past, in my old life, to take me far away from the Lord, to prevent me from following the Lord." This is why I said that the biggest problem in mankind is in each person, not outside of him. For this we need spiritual fathers. For this we need spiritual doctors. We need surgery; we need an operation; we need something to be cut in our heart.

We don't understand that this enemy that we have inside us is not our self; it's not our personality. It's only a temptation. This is the seed of the problem of the ego. We unite our personality, which is a priceless event, with our faults. We confuse our personality with our sin; we marry these two things, and we have a wrong impression of what we are. We don't know what we are, and we need someone to show us who we are; we need someone to open our eyes so that we can at least see our darkness.

There's a mystic, the greatest of the mystics, Saint Gregory Palamas. For thirty years, he was praying only this prayer: "Enlighten my darkness. Enlighten my darkness." He did not name the Lord because he did not feel worthy to name him. He did not address it to anyone, but he said this prayer day and night, more than he was breathing. Because all he knew in himself was his darkness. And he was talking to someone—to whom else?—to Christ, who said, "I am the Light." But he said only, "Enlighten my darkness."

INTERVIEWER: Show me my faults?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: Or come to my darkness and burn it. Make fire in it and make light in it. The greatest thing we can do in our lives is to discover that by ourselves we are nothing. We are darkness. We are dust.

INTERVIEWER: The ego is often characterized in the spiritual literature as a cunning and opportunistic adversary, capable of turning any situation to its advantage in its attempt to

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obstruct our spiritual progress. What do you feel is the most important quality within the individual that can help us to win the fight against the clever and ever changing ego?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: Repentance. Recognizing our mistakes and our sins, this is the highest thing that we can do. And not to recognize our sins in order to succeed at something else, but just to see the truth about ourselves. Saint Isaac, the great mystic of the Church, says that one who accepts, who understands, who recognizes his sin in front of the Lord, in reality, he is the highest. He is greater than one who has gained all the world, who feeds all the people, who makes miracles, who resurrects the dead. This man, the first one, is bigger because he can never fall down. He has a stability, a level, a place where he can talk to the Lord. He has a place where he can invite the Lord with his tears, with his repentance, with the understanding that he has done wrong. And straightaway he becomes clear. The light comes from him. He becomes a spiritual doctor, a teacher or father, because he's not afraid to recognize sins. It is not a problem for him to say, "Excuse me, it was my fault." This is the key to escape from all the drops of the devil.

INTERVIEWER: Would it be accurate to characterize this quality you're describing—this willingness to face oneself honestly—as humility?

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: Not humility. Humility is the result. It would be better to say "wisdom." We press ourselves to be humble. But to recognize my faults—what does that have to do with humility? I have to be humble in order to recognize my faults? No. I have to see them. It's an emergency. It's my way to exist for the next second. How can I exist with my faults for one second? In front of whom? In front of myself—how can I be with my faults, with my sins? I have to say, "I did it!" Dostoyevsky expresses this so beautifully in *Crime and Punishment*. The main character, Raskolnikov, kills someone, and almost immediately he understands what he did. He doesn't recognize it by himself, but with the help of the strict hard words of a prostitute, Sonya, who says to him, "Look what you did." She guides him to go into the middle of the plaza, in front of all the people, to say what he did. And he does it. He confesses. He says that otherwise he could not exist, that he would have to commit more and more and more crimes. And he accepts the sentence of the court to go for at least twenty years to the hardest prison. And he goes, and there he feels the medicine of his heart. And he takes this medicine. We have problems in life because we don't want to accept or recognize our sins. And this is the key. What else do we have to offer to each other? Gold, money, lust, food? Long life? No. Only to recognize our sins and straightaway we have a new world.

INTERVIEWER: You seem to be speaking about a kind of deep conscience that stirs when we face ourselves.

ARCHIMANDRITE DIONYSIOS: It's love. Love is more than conscience. Conscience is something that says to you, "You do this, you do this, you do this." It's like we're under our own personal court. But love is something much more. Love makes us ready to pay for the sins of others. It's a much higher step. Not only to recognize our sins but also to be able to pay for sins for which we are not responsible, as Christ did. This is love.

by Craig Hamilton
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