

2010-030

*Ethics without Faith: Darkness*

It feels as though another lifetime has passed since I was sitting there, in the narthex of that 12<sup>th</sup> century church, removed from the rest of the world. Last spring during my tenure abroad in Greece I was fortunate enough to be permitted access to the most sacred land in the Greek Orthodox Church. A 37-mile long secluded peninsula in the North-Eastern portion of the country, Mt. Athos literally means, "The Holy Mountain".

Very few non-orthodox pilgrims are granted passage to the region, composed of twenty self-governing monastic communities. For over a millennium, the Holy Mountain has been completely isolated from the outside world, providing timeless asylum for those ready to renounce secular paradigms and devote themselves to God.

My two friends and I had been traversing the lush and wild landscape for three long days until we were face to face with the imposing wooden doors of the Koutloumousio Monastery. Pilgrims, even foreigners, are generally not refused a single day's lodging, even though we were met with skeptical eyes. We signed our names into the guest list and I noticed that it had been over a year since the last visitors left. We were shown to our modest quarters and told in broken English we would be expected for afternoon liturgy service.

There we were, in the central courtyard of this medieval network of stone, brick, and wood, watching the somber and silent procession of over fifty monks individually filing out of their chambers. If you can just imagine, three American college students in our jackets, sneakers, and beanies, amidst a sea of heavily bearded Greek men adorned from head to toe in the traditional black garments of Orthodox Monks. Needless to say, we felt extremely unwelcome.

In Greek orthodox architecture, the narthex is the vestibule of the church just before the main sanctuary. We were promptly directed to stay there as the service was conducted, since it was forbidden for non-orthodox to pray inside. Several hours passed until the very last of the

monks slowly exited the building. Left alone, we weren't sure what to do next, until we heard the sound of doors close behind us. Standing there was a slightly taller monk, with graying beard, spectacles, and a warm smile.

He spoke perfect English and introduced himself as Father Gregorias. He had been the chief Abbot of the Koutloumousio monastery for two years and was delighted to have American visitors. We admitted that we had been apprehensive until then and apologized for our present appearance. After three days, miles of hiking, dehydration, and fatigue, we were feeling ashamed to have an audience with the leader of the entire monastery. He simply laughed and told us not to worry about it. He was absolutely fascinated with who we were and why we had decided to come to Mt. Athos. We continued to talk as twilight began to give an iridescent aura to the priceless Byzantine icons adorning the walls around us. We learned about his past, discussed philosophy, and reflected on the distractions of the outside world. Of many insights I will never forget, he offered us invaluable pearls of wisdom regarding faith. As I recall, he said, "Above all, faith in Divine Providence is our torch through the darkness."

Just sitting there, silhouette in the growing dim, posture perfect and continuous smile, Father Gregorias truly made each of us feel at peace. As darkness fell, it was time to end the evening's discussion. Incidentally, he was curious as to what faith we all were. "I'm Roman Catholic", Gabriel said first. "Yeah, I'm protestant", replied Michael. At the time, I didn't comprehend why I did what I did. As all eyes turned to me last, the word "*Protestant*" falsely escaped my lips. Even to this day, separated by time and space, the collapse I felt in my heart at that very moment still has a crippling resonance...

I am a Jew. I have been raised with very strong ties to my Jewish heritage. Wherever I am, whomever I'm with, whatever I'm doing, no matter what, I always take pride in this fact.

Over a decade of Hebrew Day School culminated in the grand coming-of-age for all young Jews—my Bar Mitzvah. Countless Passover Seders with family, the immeasurable rainbow colored candles of Hanukkahs past and present, and the relentless growl of my stomach whilst I fasted for Yom Kippur—being a Jew has literally provided the architecture for my life. For years I have been proudly wearing my late grandfather’s golden Star of David as a reminder of this bond—indeed, it crowns my identity.

When we got back to our quarters, Michael and Gabriel felt my unease and tried to console me. They kept saying, “Dude, don’t worry about it”, “Gregorias wouldn’t have cared either way”, “it’s not a big deal, man.” But it *was* a big deal. I couldn’t believe myself. Sure, it was guilt and grief, but more so was the *shock*. I mean, my Jewish identity was the *one* thing of which I could be certain. I never missed an opportunity to revel in the fact that I just declared my faith. But now, I not only betrayed myself, I lied to a holy man in confidence inside a place of worship. Why did I do that? Maybe I felt he would have been offended. Maybe in that church I felt one step closer to *his* faith. Lying there in that little cot, I wrestled with my own disbelief until fatigue finally won.

For the remainder of my life, I will never forget the dream I had that night. As this essay will later discuss, I have been trained to be skeptical, but what I’m about to reveal is, I promise, not a fabrication at all.

Among the torrent of loosely connected and fragmented episodes of that particular dream sequence, I can recall standing in a Jewish Temple for some unknown holiday. The place was packed, and I was standing on the Bema, the raised platform in the sanctuary. The Rabbi had opened the ark, taken out the Torah, and continued to place it in my arms. To my horror and everyone else’s, once the Rabbi let go, my strength buckled under the immense weight of the

holy document. The Rabbi held it like a feather, yet it felt like two tons in my arms. I dropped the Torah and it crashed onto the ground. Everything went dark as the entire congregation began to shriek and weep. I tried to pick it back up but I just couldn't. There was no atonement. No one else came to help me. The Torah was dead, and I let it fall...

My fingers just trembled trying to type that last sentence. I've never told anyone this entire story, not even my family. Timed right and remembered correctly, a dream can do the damndest of things to you. Even now, months later, I still shudder at that moment of horror.

When I fell asleep that night, I lost all certainty. Everything about me seemed poisoned; forward and backward were the same direction. I developed a stronger bond with someone I had known for merely two hours than with people I have known for years—only for it to climax with a lie. Faith, not just in my heritage, but in *myself*, was exhausted.

It is a cold reality that many have shared that same moment of darkness. When faith is depleted, we lose all confidence in our ability to reconcile our behavior. Choices, principles, volition—everything down to our core appears without any semblance of meaning. Indeed, this can be a shattering breach of ethics. For in my view, ethics *cannot* exist without faith. We rely on an unflinching and ineffable belief both in ourselves and our actions for some semblance of consistency. Integrity, therefore, is the disposition of knowing that the meaning we place in our choices and behavior is unable to be compromised.

Living a coherent and stable life is one of my core values. However, I'm not completely naïve. Surely times and circumstances continuously change, as this is a fundamental law of nature. It inevitably becomes a futile battle for our character to retain an impenetrable outer shell as wave after wave of unknown and life-altering experience endlessly flood our lives. But, it is in

those moments when we are confronted with our own limitations do we catch a glimpse of what we are truly capable. Thus, and forgive the metaphor, when that single giant tsunami of doubt comes to wash away all faith in ourselves we *must* remain steadfast. For if we falter in that moment of strife, uncertainty can become a poison from which we may never fully recover...

After three and a half years of my chosen college major, you know what Philosophy has taught me? Uncertainty. Skeptical analysis, critical reasoning, logical refutation—I have become an expert at picking something apart and turning it flat on its face. Maybe that’s why law schools love us. In our discipline, I would argue, we abhor certainty. We leave romance to the poets and normative discourse for the comedians. Our God is the Principle of Non-Contradiction, our divine commandments are the rules of logic, and our single decree of faith is the Socratic Maxim: “Question Everything”. Day in and day out, I’m reminded never to leave my big shaker of salt at home, arming me with the disposition necessary to meet every point of view with an appropriate counter argument.

Don’t get me wrong, I am so thankful for my privileged education. Every day, I dive head-first into the “grand discussion” with some of the most brilliant people I have ever met. We wrestle with age-old questions and new ideas, forever reinventing our preconceived biases and illusions.

Yet philosophy, for all its worth, must as well be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. I must confess, the cosmic overtone of Rationalism which courses through every capillary of the Philosopher’s body seriously troubles me. Of all its facets—Metaphysics, Aesthetics, Logic, Epistemology—there is one field of discourse I feel must be protected from the overbearing stranglehold of Rationalism: Ethics.

Ethics is the applied form of governance to our otherwise chaotic behavior. When we speak of morality, we are inherently talking about how to *judge* this behavior. Good, bad, right, wrong, just, inhumane, virtuous—labels infused with meaning taken from experience, reason, and above all, faith. No matter what, we *believe* something to be “good” not only because it makes sense, but also *feels* “right”. Now, in a philosophical sense, when asked “why?” something may be good or bad, we can come up with a whole variety of explanations. Whether because my religion tells me to, it promotes happiness for a large group of people, it’s culturally acceptable, or logically necessary, ethical behavior, simply put, requires a degree of faith. Yet once we begin to doubt that faith, catalyzed either by a traumatic experience, an unfair advantage, a convincing counter-argument, or even a disturbing dream, the façade of stability quickly turns to quicksand and we’re left alone, in the darkness, with our primal, chaotic ambivalence...

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been in the classroom, in the middle of some heated debate, and the issue of faith comes up. I don’t mind being on the receiving end of the majority’s outcries, but after three and a half years, I’m tempted to stop trying. In Philosophy, there are rules. If you can’t logically validate what you say, then you look like a fool. If even the tiniest fraction of your argument appears fallacious, it is savagely ripped apart by the most amateur of rationalists. Therefore, every time I even utter the word “faith” as a possible justification for something, I’m immediately written off as an irrational charlatan.

Peers and educators alike may dismiss my comments, but I am fully confident with what I am about to say. Unless the Philosopher is willing to appreciate faith as a core element to his

essence, he is unfit to teach a student about ethics. If you walk away from this piece with anything, please, humble me by remembering: Faith and Ethics are inseparable.

To underscore this truth, I would like to offer an anecdote. There is a particular film I wish to briefly discuss. *The Quarrel* (1991), directed by Eli Cohen, is a film about two estranged friends who both survived the horrors of the Holocaust. One is a Rabbi at a local Yeshiva and the other has become an agnostic novelist. The central crux of the story is the debate between the two friends regarding faith both in God and ethics. Chaim, the writer, is convinced God does not exist for allowing such an atrocity to happen, and the *only* thing man can trust is his own rationality. Rabbi Hersh, on the other hand, has taken a starkly different view. His faith in God was only reinforced by the Holocaust, proclaiming that Jews must not abandon what God has given them.

Both offer compelling and complex arguments as to the nature of ethics, yet it is Rabbi Hersh, I believe, who is right. At one point, the issue of Reason is brought up. He says that we *cannot* rely on reason alone. Without faith, Rabbi Hersh argues, we are able to logically justify, potentially, any course of action. If all it takes is skeptical analysis and a perfect argument, then one can be morally convinced by anything. If you merely look at “right” and “wrong” as meaningless and interchangeable points of view, then who is to say *anything* is “good” or “bad”? If my convictions, based on an “irrational” faith, are so absurd, can I truly say in that I value integrity? If faith really is blind and empty, then there is no accountability—ethical behavior is merely reduced to the whims of an attractive acumen...

I am here compelled to admit that I have used the word “faith” rather ambiguously. Do I mean faith in terms of religious dogma, or a more general kind of faith, namely, a secure belief



in something? Well, if you can humor me, I mean both tenses simultaneously. It's quite difficult to connote an exact definition of a *feeling*. Being wholly subjective, the quality of a belief is nearly impossible to analytically validate. You see, faith, as I interpret, is a secure belief in *anything*, whether it be in God, yourself, a friend, a feeling, money, the state—why, even *reason*. Yes, and you thought I was such an antagonist towards rationality. On the contrary, I am by no means advocating the abandonment of reason. I could spend hours pontificating on rationality and the incalculable benefits therein. However, when dealing with ethics, my plea to the reader as well as to those in power, i.e. educators, is not to disregard faith as a source of guidance.

When discussing ethics, I cannot presume to calculate a universal formula for everyone, because this is yet another fundamental law of nature—we each confront ourselves and the world around us *differently*. Thus, I only allow myself to speak from my own personal experience.

I believe in God. I believe in the power of friendship. I am a student of nature. I declare honesty, integrity, and compassion to be fundamental values. As I have grown into a young man, thankfully, my self-confidence has blossomed. Up to this point, I was raised to have faith in my family's ability to provide for me. Now, as I gear for the impending severance from my childhood, I have begun to cultivate a strong faith in *myself*. God-willing, it is in this next chapter of my life do I truly become a man, able to face the unknown with an unflinching sense of self-reliance.

In terms of ethics, nothing could be closer to faith. For it is in those moments of grey and dubious dilemmas of moral deliberation do I allow my faith to roar. The unyielding trust that I will act virtuously in the face of potentially destructive situations is my first and last line of defense. As I said earlier, if, in that moment of trial, do we falter in our faith, if we choose apathy

and abandon all fidelity, then the poison of uncertainty may run its due course, leaving us forever bereft of any integrity...

If it is here that you accuse this discussion of cheap and two-bit rhetoric, I must apologize. This is not an attempt to parade a façade of magnanimity. I am in no way, shape, or form trying to embellish my own virtuous character. I do, indeed, falter—more often than I'd like. What I have thus far delivered is a decree of something I try to strive for, the consummate result of a long and well-deserved self-analysis. If still I am to be dismissed, please, indulge me a little further. For it is here that I finally see something clearly. At first, my mind was rife with confusion, clotted by doubt. But it is only after this long-awaited confession that I think I understand. Alas, I guess it is as Faulkner once said, "I never know what I think about something until I read what I've written on it."

I invite you, reader, to journey with me back to that fateful night on the Holy Mountain...

If you recall the scene, there we were, my friends and I amid deep conversation with Father Gregorias. The hour grew late, and our peaceful discussion was coming to an end. He had politely asked what faith we were, and it was in that moment of shame that I betrayed myself by saying "protestant". Later that night, while lying in bed, I felt completely devastated—utterly disgusted and shocked with who I was. During sleep, I was in a place of worship very familiar to me with a man I have been accustomed to believe as holy. He placed Judaism's most sacred text in my arms and I let it fall to the ground, dead. No one else came to pick it up, darkness spread, and I was left alone...

I now have the courage to analyze what exactly happened that night. Remember the discussion we had with Father Gregorias, namely, the words about faith. He said, “Faith in Divine Providence is our torch through the darkness.” As the shroud of night fell, he offered me a test. I don’t think he was necessarily concerned with what *particular* faith I belonged to—he was testing the faith I had in *myself*. For the longest time, I was unable to cope with the fact that I failed both him and me. But now, I see, it was a necessary failure and only the beginning of a grander trial.

My dream was not about guilt towards my Jewish identity. It was a reflection of what happened earlier that evening. Father Gregorias offered me a chance to express my faith, and I faltered. Similarly, the Rabbi in my dream offered me the Torah, and I let it fall. The Torah *was* my faith. The fact that no one else came to pick it up mirrors the fact that only *I* can restore it. As I lay in bed, my anxiety and confusion deprived me of any integrity. Without that anchor, I was consumed by doubt. Without the Torah, darkness fell...

Whether a Godsend or a message from my subconscious, this dream has reinvigorated my faith. It is a reminder of what never to lose—that “torch through the darkness”. Father Gregorias spoke of Divine Providence, which I believe had a mysterious element to this experience. My faith was tested; I failed, and reminded of that failure in the form of a haunting specter I will never forget. For if I never had that horrific vision, I may well still be consumed by ambivalence. Of course he could not know, but Father Gregorias gave me the impetus necessary to ignite that flame—indeed, a searing memento of which I am forever grateful.

I don’t think it really mattered that I’m Jewish; it’s just the particular impact it has had on my identity. When you speak of the “architecture of your life”, you acknowledge not only your heritage, but your ability to reconcile who you are. Straying from something that has so heavily

sculpted my character opened a gaping crevice in my faith, and, thankfully, the lack of balance was brief. Yet not everyone is so lucky. There are those whom I won't dare insult who are continually faced with challenges unimaginable. And *this* is the realm of ethics—to confront the unimaginable and potentially disastrous experiences life will surely throw our way. It is how we meet the unknown challenges that defines our character. Applying a consistent and dignified demeanor in the midst of so much uncertainty ultimately requires one thing—faith. For in the darkness, when all else fails, be true to yourself, and rekindle your faith...

Right now, on the other side of the planet, for all we know, Father Gregorias sits quietly in his chamber on the Holy Mountain, immersed in prayer. This man may not be perfect, but his devotion to faith is something to behold. Inspired, I have done the best in my literary ability to share with you a sacred moment between teacher and student in a place eternally cast off from the rest of the world. And it is here, at the end, that I feel both humbled and honored to have been a vehicle for his wisdom. Thank you, Father.