

Glossary of Terms for Orthodox Christian Anthropology and the Spiritual Life

In discussing human nature or the “structure” of the human person, and relating this to Orthodox Christian anthropology and to the spiritual life, there are certain terms that occur repeatedly. In the Orthodox Tradition, these terms are understood in a particular manner (often different than how they may be used elsewhere) based upon the teaching of the Scriptures and the experience of the Saints. We need to know this vocabulary as well as possible in order to fully understand the principles of the Orthodox spiritual life. What follows are simply some short definitions based upon the writings and analysis of Archbishop Kallistos Ware.

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The Body – This denotes the physical or material/biological aspect of human nature; “dust from the ground.” (GEN. 2:7) In this sense, we are an animal. God has created the body, therefore it is good. The ***flesh*** can also mean human nature in its fullness (“And the Word became flesh ...” JN. 1:14), but usually flesh means the human person in his fallen state, in rebellion against God.

The Soul – The soul is created by God simultaneously with the body. It is a “creature” and is therefore not immortal by nature but by divine grace. The soul is “the life-force that vivifies and animates the body, causing it to be not just a lump of matter, but something that grows and moves that feels and perceives.” The soul moves and activates each member of the body according to St. Gregory of Sinai. As God governs the world, so the soul governs the body. The soul is not enclosed by the body, but rather occupies and fills the entire body. The body is the “vehicle” of the soul. The soul can simply mean “life” as it exists in every creature (including animals and plants): “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives his *life (psyche)* for the sheep.” (JN. 10:11) The soul can also refer to the spiritual aspect of our existence: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (MATT. 10:28) “A man is a soul, he is a human being, he is someone ...” (C. Yannaras). A soul is truly alive – “a living being” (GEN. 2:7) – when it is filled with the Holy Spirit. The human person is a *psychosomatic* unity of body and soul. A person is whole only when the soul and body are united.

The Spirit – The “spirit” of man, sometimes called the “mind” or the “spiritual intellect” (*nous*) is the “eye of the soul,” the highest aspect of the soul and of human nature. It is through our spiritual intellect that we apprehend or are in communion with God. The “spirit” is linked with the Holy Spirit; “but though connected, the two are not identical – to confuse them would be to end in pantheism.” (Ware) The cleansing of the spirit/*nous* is at the heart of the spiritual life in the Orthodox Tradition.

Archbishop Ware further writes: “Body, soul, and spirit have each their special way of knowing: the body through the five senses; the soul, through intellectual reasoning; the spirit, through the conscience, through a mystical perception that transcends man’s ordinary rational processes ... The spirit or spiritual intellect is thus distinct from man’s reasoning powers and his aesthetic emotions, and superior to both.”

Mortal or Immortal?

“Yet someone will say to us, ‘But wasn’t death a natural function of human nature? Not at all! ‘Was man therefore immortal? We do not say that either. They will then reply, ‘Do you mean man was nothing at all? No, that is not at all what we mean. Rather, by his nature man was no more mortal than immortal. If he had been created immortal from the beginning, he would have been created divine. On the other hand, if he has been created mortal, it would have appeared that God was the cause of his death. Thus he was created neither mortal nor immortal; rather, he was capable of both mortality and immortality. Had he chosen the way of immortality in following the divine commandment, he would have received the gift of immortality as recompense, and thus he would have become like God. Since instead he turned toward works of death in disobedience to God, he became himself the cause of his own death. So it is that God created man free and master of his own destiny.” *To Autolytus* II.27.