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Thoughts on Freedom (Fr. Michael Gillis)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)





St. Theophan

St. Theophan tells us that freedom is part of the divine nature that God has implanted in human beings and that freedom is the gift that we have to offer back to God. However, freedom itself is a faculty of our being that is not easy to identify. Freedom is not the same thing as choice. Much of what we generally identify as freedom is nothing more than a lack of constraint on our passion-driven, culturally-formed urges. Freedom in our culture merely means that no one can tell me what to do-I am “free” to destroy myself in whatever ways my passions drive me and my culture tells me are trendy.

And even when we are “free” to do what we want, how free is that really? How free is a young man who was beaten by his father, sexually abused by his uncle, and was hyperactive in school? Having dropped out of high school, how much freedom does he really have? Sure he has choices-limited choices conditioned by biology and experience that he has had no control over. But even his ability to choose, to see probable outcomes and consequences, is sorely limited. He may make choices, but he is not very free, even if no one but his own inner urgings is telling him what to do.

Although the limits of what our culture calls freedom are easier to see in the extreme (but unfortunately not too uncommon) case I mention above, the limits that a person raised in the best circumstances experiences are much the same—although the choices may be more pleasant and the person’s ability to predict probable outcomes may be less damaged. Still, “freedom” is conditioned in this lucky person by nurture and nature that he or she has had no control over: passions, fears, cultural dictates and childhood experiences largely dictate the choices he or she makes. This is not a very free freedom.

So what is freedom then? What is the freedom that St. Theophan talks of? What is that freedom which is part of the divine nature that God implanted in human beings?

To understand this, first we have to do away with the idea that freedom has to do with independence. Human beings are dependent beings. Independence is a delusion. On the merely biological and psychological levels this is obvious. We cannot survive without a supportive physical environment—like animals, we are dependent on our environment (even though we can morph it more than animals can, still without oxygen, water, warmth and food in the correct amount, we will die). Human beings are social. We depend on others not only for physical survival, but for psychological health. There is no such thing as independent human existence. Human beings are dependent beings. Freedom is not independence.

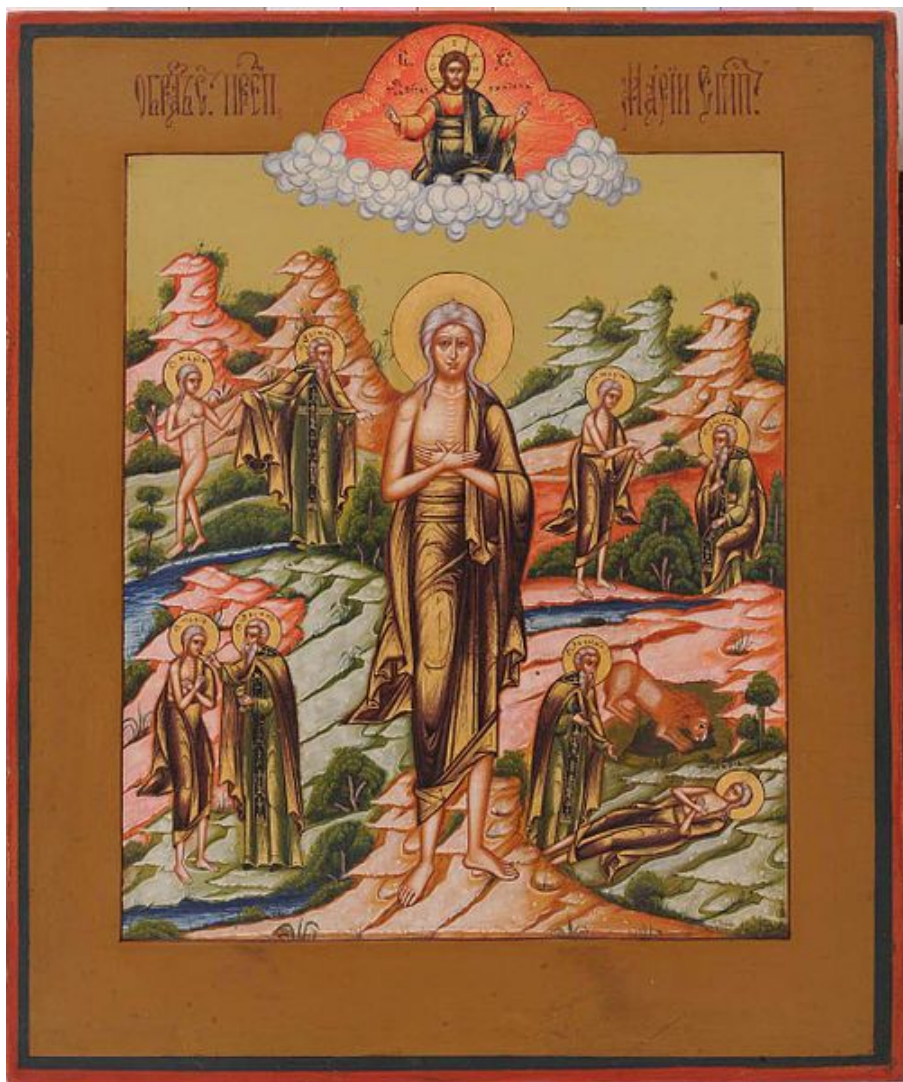
But humans are not mere biological and psychological beings. What makes us different from animals (not just in degree, but in kind) is that men and women, all men and women, are also angelic. That is, human beings have the capacity to know and experience God, even to have a relationship with God. And this angelic capacity is something human beings have the freedom to ignore or develop.

It does not matter where one is, or how gifted or disabled or even religiously inclined one is. This freedom to pay attention to the angelic life within each of us is the same. Religious contexts (or lack thereof) certainly influence how this striving for God, this inner longing for spiritual reality, manifests itself. And I would even go so far as to say that some religious contexts make it easier to pay attention to this inner reality than others. Nevertheless, the freedom is the same: to turn toward God (no matter how poorly conceived) or to ignore the inner longing.

I wish I could tell you that this pursuit of God was easily identifiable. It is not. Even within ourselves. Good religion helps give us concepts, forms and specific actions that make our pursuit of God more fruitful. But religions and the practice of religions can become perverse. Even Orthodox Christianity, which I have become

convinced is the True Faith, can be perverted in its practice such that some might think that the God that they want to turn towards could never be found there. Religion (or lack of religion) influences how we express this freedom, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but it influences it none the less.

Each one begins where he or she is, with whatever personal, cultural or familial tools (concepts, rituals, morality, religion, etc.) they have at their disposal. The freedom, however, is the same: to attend to the angelic life, to follow the Star of Bethlehem, to turn toward Life; or to turn toward death, to ignore the angelic reality that may be only faintly perceived and is certainly inadequately conceived.



Mary of Egypt

The [life of St. Mary of Egypt](#) is quite instructive in this matter (and certainly provides an extreme case study). Becoming a prostitute at twelve, Mary lived for fifteen years the life of a low-end whore in fifth century Alexandria, Egypt. She said of that period of her life that “Every kind of abuse of nature I regarded as life.” So addicted was she to what she regarded as “life,” that she often refused payment,

“doing free of charge what gave me pleasure.”

Mary was a mess. And yet, at some level she was pursuing “life,” what she in her very perverse and oppressed circumstances perceived as life. “Life” is her word. This is how she understood her experience. And this thirst for life drew her to the One who is Life, even if she continued prostituting herself along way. Eventually life leads her to circumstances, religion, that provide the forms, concepts and context in which a transformation can take place. The transformation is not a change from not pursuing life to pursuing life. Rather, it is a transformation in how she pursues life. A particular religious context provides the means through which she can encounter this life she is pursuing more clearly as the One who is Life and the categories and institutions through which she is able to understand and peruse that Life in a much more fruitful and healthy way. In St. Mary’s case, it is as a hermit.

Freedom was at work in Mary, even in very perverse circumstances. This is why we must be so, so, so careful when we judge. In fact, it is better not to judge. And yet, the realities of our life require us to make some judgements. Certainly we can “judge” that Mary’s lifestyle as a prostitute was neither healthy nor righteous. Nevertheless, we cannot judge Mary herself, and all the Marys in the world in their various circumstances, for we cannot know from the outside how they are exercising their freedom to turn toward life. We do not know how abuse and ignorance have perverted their reality. We do not know what they experience as life, and thus we cannot know how they are exercising their freedom to pursue that life, even in their wretched contexts, contexts in which they have very little choice.

“The goal of human freedom is not in freedom itself, nor is it in man, but in God. By giving man freedom, God has yielded to man a piece of His divine authority, but with the intention that man himself would voluntarily bring it as a sacrifice to God, a most perfect offering.” — St. Theophan the Recluse

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