



Two Types of Spirituality – Matthew Del Nevo

Christianity combines two types of spirituality – or has two kinds of spirituality encoded in its character.

The New Testament is written in Greek and belongs not just to the Greek language, but to the Greek *ethos* (character) as well as to the Jewish; but it is the Jewish, not the Greek, which strictly speaking is *biblical*. Christianity has historically needed to bend, as it were, the Greek (and later on the Latin) character to the biblical ethos.

Detachment (*apatheia*) belongs to the Greek ethos. Detachment was one of the chief ethical imperatives in the Graeco-Roman world into which Christianity went out. Detachment is central to Platonic, Stoic and Epicurean ethics and moral teaching.

But although it is a Greek idea, early Christianity bent it to fit the Bible. An example is the saying of Jesus to those who would follow him: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mk. 8:34; Mt. 16:24; Lk. 9:23). This has been classically interpreted to mean we need to suffer by *detaching* ourselves from our sinful nature if we want to follow Jesus, and if we want to avoid, as he goes on to say, forfeiting our very life. In the Jewish Scriptures and in the ethos of Jesus' time and place, the emphasis would have been on observance and works, rather than detachment.

There can be acts of piety without faith. A modern rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Faith is vision, sensitivity and attachment to God; piety is an attempt to attain such sensitivity and attachment." Detachment belongs to piety rather than faith.

Detachment certainly helps faith, because it is about choosing to do what we don't want to do and wouldn't naturally choose to do. This activity sensitises us to our selfishness and opens our eyes to our sinfulness, when we see the pride and vanity caught up with selfishness. Detachment, as the Stoics taught, can transform the heart. Where faith is involved, it can help us to keep Jesus at the centre, not self.

The Greek style of spirituality has first and foremost to do with concepts. The Jewish style of spirituality has first and foremost to do with situations. As Christians – even as secular people – we have to combine both. But we shouldn't confuse them. The conceptual style is detached. The object is translated into a theory or seen through a conceptual lens, as it were, which detaches us from the situation, all the better to solve it. The conceptual style relies on the expert to sort out the problem.

The situational style is involved. The situational style starts with care and realises the problem involves people and requires understanding. As Christians and

particularly as Catholics, our ethos includes both types of spirituality and an over-emphasis on either one is spiritually unhealthy.

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