
CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE BETWEEN GOD'S CALLING AND WORLD'S LUSTS ACCORDING TO THE FIRST EPISTLE OF SAINT PETER

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of how Saint Peter interprets theologically the situation that his addressees are going through. Fresh converts, these find themselves in an irreducible conflict with the pagan world to which they formerly belonged. This conflict is mainly the result of a clash of values and of a mutual estrangement, as Christians move into the sphere of power of God, and pagans, of Satan. The epistle points out that the cornerstone of the conflict lies with lust (*ἐπιθυμία*): for pagans normality means living according to their desires, whereas for Christians lust and a godly life are mutually exclusive.

Keywords: suffering, lust, desire, happiness, salvation

1. The conflictual situation and the role of lusts

The addressees of 1 Peter are mainly former pagans (I Peter 1.3, 18-19, 22-23; 2.2; 4.4) converted to Christianity. They are facing persecution, and this is posing a challenge to their faith. The abandonment of the former way of life for the Christian one, created the premises of an irreducible conflict with the society in which they live. Some of its defining features are no longer theirs, and this places them at odds with their fellow citizens, who cannot understand and accept the radical change in their lives, and therefore submit them to all kinds of tribulations, ranging from small taunts to physical abuse. Christians are "defamed as evildoers" (*καταλαλεῖσθε*, 3.16), reproached (*εἰδονειδίξεσθε*, 4.14), abused (*λοιδορία*, 3.9), accused of various penal crimes (4.15) and even beaten (*κολαφιζόμενοι*, 2.20). The gravity of the situation is amplified by the fact that most of those Christians have not yet reached the spiritual maturity that would enable them to react adequately to the hostility of their surrounding milieu. Therefore they are grieved (*λπηθέντες*, 1.6), suffering (2.19) and scared (3.6, 14; 5.7).

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The main concern of Saint Peter is to give a theological interpretation of the situation his addressees are going through. The first words of the epistle already highlight the social and theological status of the addressees. By calling them “elect pilgrims of the Diaspora” (ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς). Through terms such as ‘chosen’ and ‘Diaspora’, the author significantly places them in the lineage of Old Testament Israel, which continued to be faithful to God’s commandments even in the midst of the Gentiles, despite the uncomfortable consequences that came with such a choice. United by conversion, in the body of Christ, with their fellow Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians are not sharing into their path too. They are ἐκλεκτοῖς not only because God chose them, but also because they have themselves chosen to answer His call positively. Even if they are not foreigners in the places in which they live, they can be called “aliens and exiles” (παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους, 2.11), because they have chosen to live differently, and this mere fact has made them pariahs in their society.

But things are much more complex than this, and the author is well aware of it. The hostility of the milieu is not simply the consequence of converts having changed their manner of living. Its ultimate source is the devil (διάβολος), which is presented to the addressees as “your enemy” (ὁ ἀντίδικος ὑμῶν, 5.8). The context in which this statement is made provides the clue for understanding the reason behind this enmity. Unlike their fellow citizens, the true believers, “having been born again ... through the word of God” (1.23), are not living “for the lust of men (ἀνθρώπων ἐπιθυμίαις), but for the will of God (θελήματι Θεοῦ)” (4.2). They are no more doing “the will of the Gentiles” (τὸ βούλημα τῶν ἐθνῶν, 4.3), but submit themselves “under the mighty hand of God” (5.6). The use of the concept of willing (θέλημα, βούλημα) points to “two spheres of power” [1] which claim the human existence. The conversion of the addressees is seen as a moving from one sphere of power to the other. The mark of one is lust (ἐπιθυμία), which leads to every kind of evil, summed up in 4.3 as conformity to the will of men; and of the other, rejection of sin and the practice of virtues, summed up towards the end of epistle (5.6-7) as trusting submission to the will of God. Between these two spheres of power there is no meeting point. What is considered normality for the one is totally incompatible with the other. The ones which are doing the “will of the Gentiles” consider strange (ξενίζονται, 4.4) the fact that the believers do not follow their ways. On the other hand, for the converts, the way of their fellow citizens is clearly one of ἀσωτίας (unsavedness). Although this is the most natural sense of the term ἀσωτία, none of the English translation available to me render it in this way. One can find ‘dissipation’, ‘debauchery’, ‘wild living’, ‘riot’, none of which enclose fully the soteriological meaning of the Greek term which derives from the verb σώζω = to save). Therefore each group reflects its convictions by a particular way of living. The differences between them are first of all spiritual but become evident to the others by their visible manifestations. And the key point which marks the difference between them is the position of each one towards lust

(ἐπιθυμία): whereas for some normality means living according to their desires, for the others there is a total incompatibility between an instinctual life and a godly one.

2. The censorship of lusts in Antiquity

However, the necessity of opposing sensual pleasures was not a Christian idea. There was a widespread agreement in the ancient ethic that sensual desires must be controlled just because otherwise one could not be “successfully human” [1, p. 102]. Moreover, the submission to instinctual impulses was seen as a kind of slavery since those dominated by them were considered unable to enjoy human freedom. Epictetus, for instance, considers that “Vice has nothing in common with virtue, nor Freedom with slavery” (Golden Sayings, XLI) [2]. Therefore people seeking true freedom are counselled to search it not through the “satisfaction of every desire”, but by the “destruction of the lust (ἀνασκευή τῆς ἐπιθυμίας)” [*Dissertationes*, 4.1.175, online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0235%3Atext%3Ddisc%3Abook%3D4%3Achapter%3D1>], [3]. Epictetus is well aware that freedom from lust cannot be acquired easily; only through “great fight” (μέγας ὁ ἀγών ἐστιν) [*Dissertationes*, 2.18.28, for Greek text see: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0235%3Atext%3Ddisc%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D18>], [3] against passions can one live a self-determined life. Even if such teachings were widely spread among ancient moralists, they did not have much impact among people. Perhaps to this weak reception contributed in a high degree the fact that usually they were exposed “ethically rather than religiously” (θυμός, ἐπιθυμία κτλ) [4].

3. The lust, root and epitome of all sins

In the Old Testament and Judaism things were radically different. The control of lust is an essential requirement of the divine Law. The first commandment of the Decalogue requires total dedication to the one true God (Exodus 20.1, Deuteronomy 5.6-9) and the last one expressly mentions some desires (οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις... , Exodus 20.17, Deuteronomy 5.21) through which people break the first one (Maccabees 2.6, Romans 7.7 and 13.9 οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις sums up the tenth commandment). The Hebrew term hamad, translated in LXX with ἐπιθυμεῖν, means to desire intensely [5]. Thus the tenth commandment refers to such a strong sentiment which eclipses the love due to God. When the translators of the LXX chose to render hamad with ἐπιθυμεῖν, they were adding to the Hellenistic philosophical meanings a religious one. Thus from then on - in Judaism and then in Christianity - the term ἐπιθυμία, when used negatively, denoted the “impulsive, sensual desire, contrary to the will and pleasure of God” [6]. The failure to obey such commandments as those concerning the desire of illegitimate intercourse outside marriage or of the goods of others are counted

among the capital sins (Genesis 39.7-9, Numbers 11.4, II Samuel 11.2f, Job 31.1). Later, after the Babylonian Exile, abstinence from carnal lusts became an essential component of a pious life, and desire itself reached the point where it was considered the chief source of all sins. Therefore for true believers obedience to the Law of God implied fight and resistance against lusts. Writing about the beginnings of Christianity, Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–40 AD) is proud to point out the superiority of the Jewish religion stressing that its believers, as truly wise people, resist to sensual desires (*De Confusione Linguarum*, XVII-XVIII), while the Gentiles live in the “land” of desire having as law the “sensual pleasure” (*Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesim*, 4.39).

In the New Testament, the terms ἐπιθυμία and ἐπιθυμεῖν are used mostly negatively, in the sense of “evil desire” (θυμός, ἐπιθυμία κτλ) [4, p. 170]. In Mathew 5.28, looking at a woman with ἐπιθυμία is equated with adultery (μοιχεία). Many times ἐπιθυμία and its cognates are accompanied by qualificatives as κακή (Colossians 3.5), κακῶν (I Corinthians 10.6), τῆς ἀπάτης (Ephesians 4.22), ἀνοήτους (1 Timothy 6.9), τῶν καρδιῶν (Romans 1.24), τοῦ σώματος (Romans 6.12), τῆς σαρκός (Galatians 5.16, Ephesians 2.3, 1 John 2.16, 2 Peter 2.18), τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν (1 John 2.16), etc. As in the Old Testament and Judaism, in the New Testament ἐπιθυμία is to be opposed not because of its irrationality, as in Greek philosophy (θυμός, ἐπιθυμία κτλ) [4, p. 168-169], but because it means transgression of God’s commandments. Thus it not only breaks the human liberty, but also “hinders the orientation of life on God” [1, p. 104].

4. Lust as the cornerstone of the conflict between Christians and unbelievers in 1 Peter

In 1 Peter the term ἐπιθυμία occurs four times, in the following passages:

1. 1.13-14: “... gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope upon the grace ... as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts (μῆλοσχηματιζόμενοι ταῖς πρότερον ἐν τῇ ἀγνοίᾳ ὑμῶν ἐπιθυμίαις), as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct...”
2. 2.11: “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts (σαρκικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν) which war (στρατεύονται) against the soul.”
3. 4.1-2: “... he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his tie in the flesh for the lusts of men (ἀνθρώπων ἐπιθυμίαις), but for the will of God.”
4. 4.3: “You have already spent enough of your past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles, living in licentiousness, lusts (ἐπιθυμίαις) drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.”

The first text points out that lust (ἐπιθυμία) is incompatible with obedience to God and the holiness according to His holiness that the status of being a Christian requires. However it also suggests that the mere status of being a Christian does not, by itself, provide protection against lust. Christians must be

well aware that they can fall prey to lust as in their former times of ignorance. The text however offers advice as to how this danger can be avoided: just follow the example set by Jesus Christ, try to behave like Him, walk on the path He himself opened for His followers! This is what the participle *συσχηματιζόμενοι* implies in this context. They have on the one hand to avoid conformity with former lusts and on the other - and in the same time - to conform themselves to the One Who called them to holiness (1.14b) [7]. The importance of this theme is enhanced by portraying God as impartial Judge in v. 17.

The second passage (2.11) refers specifically to the “fleshly lusts” (*σαρκικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν*) pointing out that these “war against the soul” (*στρατεύονται κατὰ τῆς ψυχῆς*). The adjective *σαρκικός* does not appear at all in LXX, and in the New Testament it is found elsewhere only the Pauline literature (6 times: Romans 15.27; I Corinthians 3.3, 9.11; II Corinthians 1.12, 10.4). As in Saint Paul’s letters, here too it has a negative connotation, meaning the carnal instincts which these lusts can boost, thereby destroying the harmony between body and soul, and ultimately damaging even the soul itself. What the author means by ‘soul’ here is hinted at in the addressing formula: the recipients are called “sojourners and pilgrims” (*ὡς παροίκους καὶ παρεπιδήμους*) because spiritually they do not belong anymore to the Earth. Even if bodily they are present in this world, their homeland is the Heaven. As by *σάρξ* the Scripture often understands the whole human being, here too *ψυχή* probably designates the true life that humans receive when they are in connection with God and integrated into His chosen people. The ‘fleshly lusts’ are not only the result of one part of the human being, but involve the whole. Therefore it is hard to see here “the only NT passage where *ψυχή* plainly stands in antithesis to *σάρξ*”, as Schweizer asserts [4, vol. IX, p. 652].

The war metaphor used here is so suggestive that only the devil’s portrait as predator (5.8) rivals it, and the association is not accidental. These lusts, suggests the author, are powered by a hostile force which aims to take control over the human beings and to turn them away from their heavenly Father, which gave them the privilege of the heavenly citizenship evoked again at the beginning of this verse by addressing the addressees as ‘sojourners and pilgrims’. Thus they are warned that this ‘war’ jeopardizes their new citizenship and can those cause them to lapse back to their former status.

The third text (4.1-2) establishes an equivalence between lust (*ἐπιθυμία*) and sin (*ἁμαρτία*): everything done according to the “lusts of men” is sin. It connects also the theme of lust with that of the salvific suffering of Christ and the believers’ participation in it [1, p. 212]. The Lord suffered once for men’s sins in order to bring men to God (3.18). The righteous suffered for the unrighteous (3.18), i.e. for sinners, i.e. for those who act according to the “lust of men”. Since Christ destroyed the sin by suffering in flesh (*παθόντος σαρκί*), the recipients are invited to ‘arm’ themselves with the ‘same mind’, presumably Christ’s, who was victorious by obedience to God and acceptance of the cross. Again, ‘war’ language is present as in 2.11, but if there the addressees were warned about the war fleshly lusts wage against the Christian identity, here they

are exhorted to arm themselves in order to fight against the lusts, and in fulfilment of the will of God. The metaphor recalls similar Pauline advices (Romans 13.12, Ephesians 6.11f.).

The last occurrence (4.3) is a challenge to the reader. If so far ‘lusts’ were designated as the source or the epitome of all sins, here they are enumerated among other sins (in the second position, after licentiousness/debauchery) which Gentiles like to do and which the recipients themselves were doing before their conversion. The list looks as follows: licentiousness, lusts (*ἐπιθυμίας*), drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.

In the Judaism of the Diaspora, such lists of vices were used in order to underline how different and superior the ethos of the people of God was from that of the pagan world. Early Christianity took over this way of summing up the sinful characteristics of the surrounding society (Galatians 5.19-21, Romans 1.28-31, Ephesians 5.3-4). Some exegetes have suggested that the list Saint Peter uses here is probably quoted from other sources, which would explain somewhat the curious ranking of lust between ‘licentiousness’ and ‘drunkenness’. P. Davids [8] argue that “there is an artful arrangement of terms, which may explain why Peter keeps ‘desires’, which he has already used in 4:1 to summarize the whole.” However he leaves the issue unsolved. If there could be an explanation, probably one should ask why debauchery/licentiousness and idolatry enframe the list. Each constitute a climax: licentiousness (*ἀσελγεία*) is the quintessence of sins (in II Peter 2.7 the term is used for Sodom, the example par excellence of sin; in Ephesians 4.19 it characterize the heathen world generally), and idolatry, the maximum expression of apostasy. They are also closely related, in Jude 4 and II Peter 2.2, 18 *ἀσελγεία* being used for heresy and apostasy, probably under the influence of the Old Testament association of idolatry with *πορνεία*. These details put this list in a new light: since the framework is exhaustive by the symbolic significance of the two elements which compose it, the items enclosed within could be seen as parenthetical, or explanatory: How could human beings arrive to this bottom of sinfulness? Simply, by accepting as natural or normal such things as drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, which have as common root the uncontrolled lusts.

The next verse (4.4) suggests that such sins were not committed accidentally; both Christians, before their conversion, and their fellow citizens were addicted to such vices. They all were running in the same ‘torrent of debauchery’. Now the pagans are surprised that the Christians do not run together with them towards the satisfaction of lust. The verb used here (*τρέχω* = to run) suggests “the frenetic pace of their continually disappointing search for true pleasure” [9]. This is more or less the defining feature of an addict. Therefore those people who have fallen prey to their sinful desires are addicted, and this renders them unable to understand their real status, or their neighbours’ different style of life. That’s why they are ‘surprised’ (*ξενίζονται*) by the new lifestyle of their fellow citizens. They live for the satisfaction of their hedonic desires and are unable to see other ways of pursuing the happiness than their own. Moreover, since the “fleshly lusts wage war against the soul” (2.11), non-

resistance to this assault has as primary consequence the destruction of the human being, which ceases to be fully human. This is, among others, the reason for their hostile, impulsive and abusive behaviour towards Christians and, consequently, towards God Himself, whom they are blaspheming (4.4). This is, in short, why Christians are experiencing the “fiery ordeal” (πυρώσει, 4.12), the details of which are discussed in this letter.

5. The role of Satan

Speaking about the ‘fiery ordeal’, Saint Peter invites the recipients of the letter to interpret it as a test of their faith. If their pagan neighbours are surprised (ξενίζονται) in face of their new lifestyle, Christians are not to be surprised (μὴ ξενίξεσθε) by the enmity of the surrounding society. The inhuman behaviour of the addicted ones is an integral part of the war the devil wages against the Christians. He is their foe par excellence, the (ὁ) adversary (ἀντίδικος), the redoubtable enemy believers must oppose appropriately (5.8-9). It is worth noticing that Saint Peter does not call the addressees to oppose to the pagans which are causing them sufferings; to the contrary, they have to be concerned about their salvation! On the other hand, they must actively oppose Satan and lusts (5.9). As ones who do not act according to God’s will, pagans are under Satan’s authority and, consequently, their sins, their addiction and their anti-Christian actions are all Satan-inspired. The imagery used for the description of the devil’s anti-Christian activity relates it to the ‘fiery ordeal’ the believers are facing, and situates it within an ecclesiological and eschatological context. The believers must be aware how dangerous Satan is, and how he works. That is the first purpose and meaning of the image of the roaring lion, the quintessential predator. In Antiquity lions were seen as the most ferocious beasts and probably for this reason their image was associated with the enemies of the people of God (see, for example, Psalm 21.13. From the time of Nero numerous Christians had died being thrown as food to these beasts). As the sheep departed from the flock is in deadly danger, so are the members of the Church if they leave the community [10]. Therefore they have to discipline themselves (νήψατε), standing “firm in faith” (5.9). As good shepherds aware of the danger posed by the beasts of prey, they must keep themselves watchful (γρηγορήσατε). This call to vigilance in addition outlines the eschatological framework in which Saint Peter situates the conflict his addressees are engaged in.

Satan’s enmity towards the believers does nothing but confirm their status as bondservants of God; by this confirmation, it could actually contribute to their spiritual progress. Moreover, the power of the devil must not be overstated. In the image of their Lord (3.18, 22; 4.1), and in association with Him, in submission “under the mighty hand of God” (5.6) and assisted by the Holy Spirit (4.14), the faithful are able to resist the work of the devil, to live “according to the will of God” (4.2) and not according to the “lust of men” (4.2), and thus attain the “goal (τὸ τέλος) of the faith”, which is “the salvation of souls” (1.9).

6. The liberation from lusts and the new understanding of happiness

For Saint Peter ἐπιθυμία is one of the key points which marks the difference between then and now in the life of his addressees. They were addicted to ‘fleshly lusts’; now these belong to the surrounding world. What brought such a radical change in their lives? Saint Peter says that this is primarily the result of a coherent work of the Holy Trinity. The Christians are what they are because the Father called them, because Jesus Christ freed them through his blood and because the Holy Spirit sanctified them (1.2). Now they can call God Father (1.17) because Jesus Christ “suffered once for sins” in order to bring them to God (3.18). Receiving His word (1.23) they have been born again through the Holy Baptism, which operates an opening of the human conscience toward God (3.21). Therefore the formerly addicted have acquired a new perspective on good and evil. With this new conscience they are able to understand God’s word and to grow up into salvation εἰς σωτηρίαν (2.2). This process of maturation consists in a continual approaching to God (2.4) and implies the fulfilment of a priestly service to which all the faithful are called (2.5, 9). Formerly attached to the fleshly lusts, their hearts have now become privileged places of worship (3.15). Their whole life must be therefore a living testimony about their God and His excellencies (ὑπερέτως) to the surrounding people (2.9). This serves to give the non-believers the opportunity to understand that there is a better way to find fulfilment in the human lives than that of lusts, and that the joy Christians share is infinitely greater than the one they are searching through the satisfaction of their hedonic desires.

However Saint Peter is well aware that Baptism and the gifts which the Holy Spirit bestows upon the believers are not absolute guarantors of an ideal Christian life. The converts can fall prey to the “lusts of men” (4.2) again if they are not wary of the war that Satan wages against them (2.11, 5.8), if they do not stand “steadfast in the faith” (5.9), if they do not keep themselves in the discipline of the Church (5.5), if they do not humbly entrust themselves in God’s providence (5,6), and if they do not try to configure their whole life according to that of Christ (cf. 1.14-15). Writing to Christians confronted with various kinds of persecution, some of which took very brutal forms, Saint Peter stresses that suffering for Christ’s sake must be received as a privilege. It is the best way in which believers can partake of the Lord’s sufferings (κοινωνεῖτε τοῖς τοῦ Χριστοῦ παθήμασιν, 4.12); it is the blessed way to follow Him faithfully on the path of the Cross. Therefore, to the true Christian, suffering for Christ brings real joy, because by this they participate also in the exaltation of the Cross. This joy is the sign of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (4.14) and an anticipation of the “exceeding joy” they will experience at His Parousia, when Lord’s glory will be fully revealed (4.13)

7. Conclusion

Both for ancient philosophers and for Christians, lust was an impediment to happiness and fulfilment as a human being. However, whereas for the former freedom from lust and true happiness could be attained by intellectual and physical exercise, for Saint Peter liberty from lust and happiness are inseparable from submission to the word of God, active opposition to evil, an effort to follow Christ faithfully, even on the path of the Cross, and, overall, the salvific work of the Holy Trinity.

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