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RUSSIAN SPIRITUAL TRADITION: UNION OF CONCILIARITY AND ASCESIS

I. Eastern-Orthodox spirituality in its main principles and specific features

It is well-known that Eastern Christianity calls its tradition Orthodoxy. What is the sense of this name, what idea does it bring? The Greek word *Ortho-doxia* means literally «right praising», that is the right way to praise God or, more precisely, the right kind of the relationship between Man and God. But we must immediately add to it that this relationship is considered and felt by Eastern Christians as a deeply personal relationship. It is felt that its main contents cannot be expressed by any formal rules or abstract postulates, because they belong to the most intimate and profound experience of a human person. In other words, *Orthodoxia* as the right relationship with God is a certain kind of personal experience: namely, that unique kind of experience that is the experience of life with Christ or in Christ, the experience of Christocentric way or mode of life (cf. Gal 5,12). This is what is considered here as the true core of Christ's Good Tidings, and hence the main task of the religious tradition as well as the main task of spiritual life of an individual Christian is to keep this experience authentic and complete and reproduce it identically, for the further translation or transmission in space and time.

Here we notice, however, that the main task of the religious and spiritual tradition may also be seen differently. The tradition usually tries to formulate its message, its positions in the form of a certain basic postulates and dogmas, bringing them together into some self-consistent teaching or doctrine. And it may naturally see its main task in creating such full and self-consistent teaching and then keeping it undistorted and developing it further. This is exactly the view adopted by Western Christian confessions. The presence of the two different basic attitudes or strategies of Christian consciousness in the West and East can be noticed as early as in the 4th c., the crucial century in the formation of Christianity as a world religion. The «theoretical» or «doctrinal» strategy has been clearly put to the foreground by St Augustine and the subsequent Western theology; while the «practical» or «experiential» strategy has been put to the foreground in the East, where even the Church Fathers, who have written basic theological texts, acknowledged the primacy of the personal experience of communion with Christ.

It is well-known, how Western Christian consciousness was solving the problem of comprehensive Christian teaching; the solution is the impressive building of Western theology, Roman Catholic and Protestant. But it is much less known and understood, how the Eastern Christian tradition fulfilled what it considered to be its main task: the identical reproducing of the authentic experience of communion with Christ. Obviously, it was necessary for the solution of the problem to have indisputable, authentic examples or models of the experience in question. Since the experience is deeply personal, to find its examples means to find people who indisputably possess such experience. Thus the crucial question of Eastern-Orthodox consciousness took the following form: *who are the bearers of the authentic experience of communion with Christ?* It is not a simple question at all, and comprehensive answer to it required penetrating insight into and profound reflection of the foundations and forms of Christian spiritual experience.

Getting deeper into the question, religious consciousness discovered that the answer to it has historical dimension, it depends upon sacral or spiritual characteristics of historical situation. Namely, in different periods of Christian history, in conformity with changing spiritual situation, the bearers of the genuine experience of communion with Christ change too: in the direct succession, they are represented by **apostles – then martyrs – then ascetics**. All the three categories of witnesses are radically different between them, but the most important thing is that the experience gained by them is considered by the Church as exactly the same, perfectly identical in its spiritual essence in all the three cases. In apostles' experience this essence is the most obvious: quite clearly, this experience is indeed the communion with Christ, which takes here the form of usual empiric intercourse. Equally obvious, however, is that such form of the Christocentric communion with God is only possible during Christ's earthly life. In the next period, that of persecution of Christians by pagan Roman Emperors, Christian consciousness finds that communion with Christ continues to be possible, but now it is achieved in martyrdom. Martyrdom is the realization of such communion, because it means taking part in Christ's sacrificial death, and this means, in its turn, taking part also in Christ's victory over death, that is new life in Christ. The form taken by the experience of communion with Christ is now completely different, it is not empiric communication anymore, but the experience of death by violence, the most terrible kind of extreme anthropological experience. And nevertheless, in their spiritual essence, the death of a martyr and apostle's meeting with Christ are the same spiritual or sacral event.

In the two events we see also one more common feature, which is very important: they both are possible only due to some specific features of the surrounding reality, which do not depend upon the bearer of the experience and cannot be secured by him. Apostle's experience is possible only during Christ's earthly life, and similarly, martyr's experience is possible only during persecutions; what is more, it cannot be «self-made», the Church was always forbidding to look deliberately for martyrdom. And this implies that the second historical form of communion with Christ, martyrdom, also becomes impossible, when the epoch of persecutions comes to its end.

Thus the new epoch, when Christianity became the state religion, brought a new and profound problem for those Christian believers, for whom the supreme value and main goal of Christian life were in gaining personal and authentic Christocentric experience. Now the reality of human existence was not anymore an exceptional kind of reality, in which the possibility of personal communion with Christ was secured by some special properties of it, like the physical presence of Christ or threat of violent death for any Christian. Christians were now just in usual empiric life; and it is in such life that they had to find ways and means to achieve genuine union with Christ, identical to the union achieved first by apostles and then by martyrs. But here we must remember that by Christian doctrine, uncreated God's being and created fallen Man's being are radically different from each other and separated by ontological distance or split. Hence it follows that the union with Divine Being means actual ontological transition or transcension of man's mode of being, the change of the ontological status of the latter. Due to this, it cannot be achieved by any usual, empiric human strategies, it is impossible empirically, and might be made possible only with the help of Divine Being itself, that is God's grace or Divine Energies, to use the terms of the later Orthodox theology.

It turns out that for this maximalist type of Christian consciousness, its main goal can only be achieved by means of a most specific strategy, alternative to all usual

human strategies: a strategy not directed to any concrete aim in man's horizon of being, but striving to go out of this horizon and get into contact and union with different, Divine Being, thus performing actual ontological transformation. The creation and elaboration of this strategy developed into large-scale work that was undertaken by Eastern Christianity. It is not surprising that this work took many centuries. Obviously, the strategy had to be holistic: the transformation desired had necessarily to involve man as a whole and touch all levels of the organization of a human being, intellectual, psychic and somatic. It made the work very intricate; but the main difficulties lied in the alternative nature of the strategy. It did not belong to any kind of strategies of empiric existence, and hence it implied the distancing from all occupations of everyday worldly life and rejection of all usual social, cultural, behavioral forms and stereotypes; in fact, it demanded developing a whole alternative way of life. Christian consciousness became aware of this very quickly. The Roman Empire has turned into Christian state, and almost immediately the most ardent Christians started to escape from this state. They were fleeing away from cities to secluded places, to wilderness, and starting to live there as hermits, avoiding all contacts with secular society and devoting themselves completely to spiritual works. Such process was especially active in the Egyptian provinces of the Roman Empire, and soon Egyptian deserts became widely known as the place where hundreds and thousands of people retired from worldly life. All the phenomenon was later given the name of the **opposition of the Empire and Desert**; and now we see clearly the roots and motives of this famous historical episode.

The opposition of the Empire and Desert represents just external, social sides of the new strategy of Christian life that was in the process of formation. Internal sides were much more important, however. Hermits, or ascetics, or Desert Fathers as they were called, were practicing a very specific form of human experience, called usually *mystico-ascetic experience*. In their caves and cells they had to solve many extremely difficult spiritual and anthropological problems. How is it possible to advance to the goal, which is absent in man's horizon of being and so is not of anthropological, but meta-anthropological nature? Firstly, such goal is unattainable by man's own efforts, and secondly, even if this obstacle is surmounted somehow, how can there be any map or road instruction for the way to such goal? How to be in control of the process of the advancement in this way? Which are the criteria for the comprehension and interpretation of the anthropological and meta-anthropological experience that represented the contents of the process in question (regarding that this experience has no analogues in the usual human experience)? How can it be checked that the process had not gone astray – and, if it did, how to come back to the right way?

This list includes only some basic questions of mystico-ascetic experience; but it is clear already that the man who wants to realize the discussed strategy cannot work out the answers to all these questions, if he relies only on his own individual experience. It is evident that reliable realization of this strategy needs a certain method or rather methodological complex, defining all the basic properties of the considered kind of mystico-ascetic experience. Such methodological complex should describe precisely all the situation and all procedures, which are necessary to produce the sought-for experience: how should this experience be organized – checked up – interpreted – corrected, if needed; etc.etc. In other words, this complex should correspond to the Aristotelian notion of the *Organon*. Thus we have drawn the important conclusion: genuine mystico-ascetic experience leading to a meta-anthropological goal – in our case, to authentic communion with Christ, identical to

the experience of apostles and martyrs – should create its own Organon, which describes and regulates all the process of the advancement to the goal.

As we stressed, the creation of the Organon is a task that exceeds by far any individual possibilities and stretch of individual life. It demands a coordinated and devoted work of many generations; and after being created, the Organon must be preserved and transmitted in time. This is also a collective work, that should be done by some community that reproduces itself in generations. Such collective body that reproduces itself in generations and devotes itself to careful preservation and identical transmission of a certain spiritual and anthropological experience is exactly what is called *spiritual tradition*. Eastern-Orthodox spiritual tradition founded by Desert Fathers in the 4th c. has also the name of the Hesychast tradition or simply **Hesychasm**, after the Greek word *hesychia*, which means quietness or silence; and the experience, the conditions for which it provides, is called the Hesychast practice, or else Hesychast asceticism. The entire process of the practice has the structure of a ladder with distinct steps, and the key feature of the process is the development of a special form of the art of prayer (namely, the incessant doing of the so-called Jesus Prayer, the text of which is: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*). The incessant character of the prayer is secured with the aid of sophisticated technique of concentrated attention, and all the process, called also the «intellectual prayer», has analogues in the schools of spiritual practice in other world religions.

The work of the Hesychast tradition, as we said, consisted in creating the Organon of mystico-ascetic experience, the goal of which is the authentic personal communion with Christ. This work took about one thousand years: the last and very important completing elements have been added to the Hesychast Organon in the 14th c. These elements have been worked out in the practice of Byzantine monks, chiefly in the monasteries of the main center of Hesychasm in the Athos peninsula, and included profound theological interpretation of the Hesychast experience, given in the writings of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), who was also an Athosite monk. This theological progress was the fruit of the sharp polemic around Hesychast practice in the mid-fourteenth century, called «Hesychast disputes». It lasted about twenty years, involving not only ecclesiastic circles, but all layers of Byzantine society; and resulted in the victory of Hesychasts followed by the period of flourishing of the tradition, which was later given the name of Hesychast Renaissance.

II. Russian spirituality in a brief survey

Christianity has been brought to Russia from Byzantium in the 10th c., and its most active development on Russian soil, which started immediately with the so-called Baptism of Russia in 988, included the adoption of the Hesychast practice and Hesychast tradition. Hesychasm took an important place in Russian religious consciousness. It was considered as the core of Christian spirituality, and it was generally accepted that Hesychast monks, or elders, as the most experienced of them were called, possess the highest authority not only in spiritual, but also in moral and sometimes even political matters. Soon Hesychast spirituality became an organic part of Russian national mentality, and started to be perceived as something truly Russian, and not brought from foreign lands and belonging to an alien culture. But, in spite of this feeling, in the initial period of the 10th-13th cc., when Russia had its capital in Kiev, Russian Christianity and Church followed quite closely the Byzantine model. And this was especially true of Russian Hesychasm, since the identical character of the transmission is a strict law of spiritual tradition and spiritual experience. Just as

Byzantine Hesychasm on Athos followed the rules and regulations of the first Egyptian and Palestinian hermits, so Russian Hesychasm was following the same ancient rules; and even the names chosen by Byzantine and then Russian monks in the rite of taking monastic vows, were usually selected among the names of famous ancient anachoretēs. This «law of structural similarity» manifested itself also in the fact that the early Kievan stage of Russian Hesychasm resembled more the early Egyptian stage of Hesychast tradition than the mature late Byzantine stage; the refined Hesychast «theology of Divine Energies» developed in Palamas' works remained practically unknown in Russia.

The Mongol invasion in the mid-thirteenth century has brought forth a sharp break in the course of Russian history. Next period of this history, known as the period of Muscovite Russia (the 14th-17th cc.) was very different from the Kievan period in all principal aspects, including religious life. In this period Russian Church gained autonomy from the Constantinople Patriarchate. The influence of Byzantine Hesychasm had a new upsurge in the 14th c. due to Hesychast Renaissance; but afterwards this influence was gradually weakening, which process could only increase after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Correspondingly, Russian Church and spirituality began to develop more actively and show more markedly their own specific trends and features.

In the first place among them we should mention the strong bent to collective forms of monasticism and spiritual discipline. The division into the collective (cenobitic) and individual (anachoretic) currents played an important role in the history of Christian monasticism. In the early Egyptian and Palestinian Desert monasticism solitude was considered as one of principal conditions favorable to Hesychast practice, and sometimes even as necessary for it. Similarly, mature Byzantine Hesychasm was connected mainly with the solitary ascesis, many variations of which have been developed to that time. As for Russia, the first centuries of its Muscovite period were the time of the most active spreading of monasticism, and Hesychasm was predominant among its forms. The great ecclesiastic and spiritual leader of this period, St. Sergius of Radonezh (1314-1392) was himself a follower and supporter of Hesychasm. In the next generations after him, his numerous disciples (and then disciples of disciples, etc.) founded hundreds of monasteries over all the vast Northern region of Russia, so that a certain part of this region was nicknamed «Russian Thebaide», after the famous area of the ancient monasticism in Egypt. In most of these new monasteries their inhabitants were practicing Hesychasm, and often this practice followed the mature Byzantine model of the incessant doing of Jesus Prayer. However, these monasteries were cenobitic, while anachoretic monasticism was much less widespread. And this means that an important new feature of Russian Hesychasm was the adaptation of Hesychast practice to collective forms of monastic discipline.

Another new feature was the paramount importance of religious art and, first of all, the icon-painting, in spiritual life. In the Muscovite period the brilliant Russian national school of the icon-painting emerges, the greatest figure in which was St. Andrey Rublev (c.1360-1430). The art of the icon has also been inherited from Byzantium, but in this period it develops its own character and style, markedly distinct from the Byzantine model. The characteristic feature of the Russian school was the combination of the highest artistic qualities with profound spiritual message. Many new types and themes have been introduced into the icon-painting by Russian masters, and due to this, Russian icon is an immensely rich world. Russian religious

philosopher, prince Evgeny Trubetskoy has called this world of the Russian icon the «worldview expressed in colors», and this formula became widely popular.

It has to be taken into account, however, that the formula by Trubetskoy, which is given often in the form «philosophy in colors» too, conceals some additional sense. It points out not only the richness of the discourse of the Russian icon, but also the poverty of Russian philosophy and other discourses, by means of which the worldview is usually expressed. Russian worldview was beautifully expressed in colors, but it was only too poorly expressed in theology and philosophy. And it was another distinction of Russian spirituality: non-verbal discourses played here much more important role than they did in other cultures.

Thus in the Muscovite period Russian spirituality succeeded in creating its own character and style, growing into a new and original version of Eastern-Orthodox spirituality. One can say that it preserves to this day the principal features, which have been formed in that period. For this reason we shall only very briefly characterize the further periods. With Peter the Great (1672-1725), the founder of Saint-Petersburg, the epoch of the Russian Empire opens. It is well-known that the main trend of this epoch was the intense and frequently forced Westernization of the country, that is the propagation of the West-European models in all fields and sectors of national life. In the field of culture the Westernization has borne brilliant fruits, resulting in the emergence of the great Russian classical culture of the 19th c. However, in the religious and spiritual life it produced very ambiguous results, generating new splits, conflicts and contradictions.

Even before the Empire period, theology in Russia (to say nothing of philosophy, which was virtually absent for a very long time) was deeply penetrated by West-European influence, that is the influence of Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. Obviously, this influence could only increase with the Westernization (usually at any moment either the Catholic or Protestant influence prevailed, and this prevalence could change to the opposite for various, sometimes quite accidental reasons). The inevitable implication was the split between the Westernized theology taught in theological seminaries and academies, and the native Eastern-Orthodox spiritual tradition. This tradition, the core of which was Hesychasm, was kept staunchly in monastic circles and lower, uneducated social strata; and hence there emerged and was going deeper and deeper the **split between Orthodoxy and culture** (which had the curious peculiarity that the scholastic Orthodox theology belonged not to the Orthodox, but to the «cultural» side of this split). In the 18th and 19th cc. this split grew into one of the most characteristic and dangerous features of Russian civilization, added to many other tensions and conflict trends in Russian society.

The end of the 19th c. has been marked in Russia by the start of a new striking cultural epoch, that was given later the name of the Silver Age. It was a brief, but extraordinarily fruitful time, when great talents abounded in all fields of culture, and new great works of art, literature and philosophy appeared nearly every day. One of the main components of the Silver Age was so-called Religious-Philosophical Renaissance. It was a powerful philosophical movement, the core of which constituted a new and original current in Christian metaphysics, called «metaphysics of Total-Unity». This current, founded by Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900), belonged to the ancient tradition of Christian Platonism and included many prominent philosophers: Fr Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), Fr Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944), Semyon Frank (1877-1950), Evgeny Trubetskoy (1863-1920), who was mentioned above, e.a. One of the goals of the Religious-Philosophical Renaissance was exactly to overcome the split between Orthodoxy and culture; in particular, metaphysics of

Total-Unity tried to join ideas and paradigms of classical West-European metaphysics with the basic attitudes and mythologems of Orthodox spirituality and Russian national mentality. But this goal was achieved only very partially. The same period preceding the October Revolution of 1917 was also the time of blossoming forth of Russian Hesychasm, when great Hesychast teachers lived, such as St Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) and St Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894). This period in the history of Hesychasm is also called the Russian Hesychast Renaissance; but the two renaissances did not merge – and even did not meet practically.

Thus the problem of overcoming the split between the Russian Orthodoxy and culture remained to the future. Some ways to its solution were outlined in the theology of the Russian emigration; but nevertheless even today it continues to be one of essential problems of the postcommunist Russia.

III. Principle of conciliarity and its role in Russian spirituality and history

As we said above, the principal specific feature of Russian spirituality is the bent to collective forms of monasticism and spiritual life. Obviously, such bent should reflect some deep-lying features of national mentality. There can be no doubts that such features do exist; and one of the most powerful and successful attempts to articulate them in the theological and philosophical discourse was the famous theory of conciliarity propounded by the philosopher and lay theologian Alexey Khomiakov (1804-1860).

Traditionally, the presentation of this theory starts with the analysis of the term itself. Both its history and its meaning are intricate. Before Khomiakov, the term «conciliarity» was not used. Thus it is his neologism, and he derived it from the third attribute of the Church in the Slavonic text of the Christian Credo: «... *the one, saint, catholic and apostolic Church*». In the Greek original, the third attribute of the Church is given by the term «catholikos», which has been introduced by Aristotle, and the meaning of which is not so simple, but can approximately be described as general, comprehensive, universal, etc. The Latin and all West-European translations are loan translations, that is, they do not really translate the word, but preserve it. Contrary to this, the medieval Slavonic translation of the attribute (kept not only in modern Russian, but in other Slavonic languages too) was «*sobornyy*», which is the adjective from «*sobor*», that is council, and hence should be rendered in English as «conciliarity». Khomiakov noticed aptly that this translation, having no analogues in the West, opens the way to far-reaching theological speculations.

First of all, the terms *conciliary* and *conciliarity* put Church and Council into the closest connection with each other, making the latter the inseparable attribute of the former. Khomiakov derives from this connection the maximum of theological implications. Analyzing the notion of the Church Council, he finds that his «conciliarity», as the constitutive principle of the Council, represents a special kind of unity («conciliary unity»), which does not suppress or restrict freedom of its elements or members, but is completely equivalent to this freedom; so that «conciliary unity» is such unity of the many, all the members of which are completely united and completely free at the same time. By virtue of the Slavonic Credo, this ideal kind of unity becomes the constitutive principle of the Church: in fact, the definition of the specific mode of being that the Church represents. And on this basis, the whole ecclesiological theory is unfolded, which is usually called «theology of conciliarity». The Church is represented as a living organism; but, using this characteristic, Khomiakov points out at the same time such properties of the Church, which are

incompatible with the empiric reality. Thus the mode of being inherent in the Church is meta-empiric being, having Divine nature; and, always stressing this, Khomiakov avoids the danger of the organistic reductionism.

Khomiakov had no time to develop his theology of conciliarity into a full-scale theological teaching, since he died of cholera, being only 56 years old. However, he has outlined many thematic sections of this theology. His conceptions of the ecclesiastic truth, of the power and authority in the Church gained much popularity among Orthodox theologians. Considerable attention was always given by him to interconfessional polemic with Protestantism and, chiefly, Roman Catholicism; and it was noted repeatedly that his polemic is often too sharp and unfair even for his epoch, when the interconfessional relations were much more hostile than nowadays. What is more important for us, he has also formulated basic ideas of theology of prayer. Here we can see clearly both the common points and points of divergence of his thought with Hesychast spirituality. Very definitely, he presents here as a convinced advocate of collective, shared forms of spiritual life. Prayer is for him not a personal practice, but an act committed by all the Church body. It is what connects all members of this body, and in this sense, it is a «horizontal» activity, while in Hesychasm prayer is, in the first place, a «vertical» activity addressed to God.

Thus the two strategies of Orthodox spirituality and theology, «collectivist» and «individualist» ones, seem to be incompatible. Such conclusion turns out to be superficial, however. The problem of the relationship between the two ways was given much attention in modern Orthodox theology. Basing on many detailed studies of both Hesychast spirituality and theology of conciliarity, this theology came to the opposite conclusion. The Organon of Hesychast practice includes quite a number of collective (intersubjective or conciliary) aspects, and, first of all, it assumes firmly the necessary presence of ecclesiastic dimensions of spiritual experience. On the other hand, theology of conciliarity, stressing the meta-empiric nature of the Church, presumes implicitly, but necessarily «vertical» dimensions of the life in the Church and prayer. Starting from different positions, the two strategies advance in the same direction and to the same goal. And it can be said in conclusion, that Eastern-Orthodox and Russian spirituality can be considered as harmonic union of the conciliary and Hesychast principles.