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VISUAL EXPERIENCE AND SPATIAL EXPERIENCE IN THEIR RELATION TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICE¹

I. General Concept of Spiritual Practices and Structure of the Hesychast Practice

1) Spiritual Practice as a Phenomenon and Paradigm

In the research and description of a human being, new anthropology focuses on anthropological practices. Among them, the most essential are those, in which the constitution of man is formed so that the corresponding anthropological experience is constitutive experience. In particular, the approach of synergetic anthropology reveals a special anthropological role and value of so called *spiritual practices* created by world religions. These include Eastern-Orthodox Hesychasm, Islamic Sufism, practices of oriental religions (various schools of yoga, Daoism and others). Spiritual practice is a process of man's consecutive self-transformation directed to the achievement of a "higher spiritual state" or *Telos* that does not belong to the horizon of man's empirical being. The *Telos* is determined by basic postulates of the corresponding religion on absolute (divine) being. Putting into effect man's authentic religious strive for such being, spiritual practice serves as the spiritual core of its religion, and represents pure quintessential experience of this religion. The ontological otherness of *Telos* implies the most important feature of spiritual practice: it must possess the complete "Organon" of its experience, i.e. the set of rules that fully determine the organization, testing and interpretation of the experience. The general structure of spiritual practices follows the step paradigm, and each step of the practice is characterized by a particular configuration of all energies of a man called "anthropological energetic formation" in synergetic anthropology.

2) Structure of the Hesychast Ladder

Steps of the hesychast practice, forming the so called "Paradise Ladder" (St. John of the Ladder, the 7th c.), describe a spiritual and anthropological process advancing from the "Spiritual Gate" (*metanoia*, conversion, repentance) to the *Telos* identified with the deification of man (*theosis*, complete unification of all man's energies with the Divine energy, or grace). What matters for us is the division of this Ladder into big parts: the Ladder includes a group of initial steps (ascetic's consciousness is still occupied by worldly subjects and problems); a central group (the consciousness completing its cardinal restructuring creates the "ontological mover", which represents the union of the two activities, Prayer and Attention, making it possible to climb the Ladder); and a group of higher steps on the approaches to *Telos* (the part of the practice known as *Theoria*, contemplation). In the central and higher parts the ascension takes the character of spontaneous generation of the hierarchy of anthropological energetic formations rising to *Telos* – *Theosis*.

II. Visual Experience versus Hesychast Experience: Initial Opposition

1) The dichotomy of the set of spiritual practices according to personal/impersonal nature of their *Telos*. The main distinctions of the two types of practices.

In the practices of the two types the advance to *Telos* can be characterized in its essence as, respectively, self-structuring or self-destructuring. In the first type, generation of new modi of

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subjectivity, new structures of personality and identity takes place; in the second type, dismantling of the existing structures takes place.

In the practices of the first type, the basic dynamic element is prayer, the leading perceptive discourse is audio, or “hot” discourse (according to McLuhan).

In the practices of the second type, the basic dynamic element is meditation, as a rule, using images, the leading perceptive discourse is visual, or “cool” discourse (according to McLuhan).

2) The hesychast opposition of audio and visual discourses: “Heating of emotions” and “Exorcism of images”.

St. Theophanes the Recluse: “Hurry up to make your heart warm!”.

St. Theophanes the Recluse: “All images should be exorcised from your mind!”.

The opposition results directly from the fact that the fundamental relationship Man – God is actualized by hesychast practice in the element of personal communion.

III. From Opposition to Cooperation: Visual Experience in the Extended Religious Context

1) Spiritual practice and adjacent practices of the Self. Adjoining and supporting practices. Practices cultivating personal constitution.

2) Visual experience in adjacent practices: the alternative.

The opposition established by hesychast teachers refers directly to the sphere of quintessential experience (*Noetic Practice*), stating that visual experience is not admitted inside this sphere, and hence it is not a quintessential experience. However, if the visual experience takes part in some adjacent practices of the Self, its relation to the quintessential experience is a priori open so that the alternative arises: it can be either supporting or impeding for the latter.

3) Harmonious coordination and cooperation of the visual and quintessential experience: basic example of icon worship and other examples.

IV. Spatial Experience *versus* Hesychast Experience: Paradigm of Sacralization and Paradigm of Deification

1) The paradigm of sacralization: its genesis, constitution, typology. The *economia* (economy) of sacralisation and *economia* of deification in their historical interaction.

2) Spatial experience and quintessential experience. The spatiality of the Eucharist as “spatiality of theosis”. Sacred spaces in their relation to the sphere of deification: the alternative similar to that one in the case of visual experience. The problem of harmonious coordination of spatial and quintessential experience.

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