

## **CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY AND EASTERN-ORTHODOX (HESYCHAST) ASCETICISM**

### **I. Triple structure of Christian anthropology**

The situation of Christian anthropology is paradoxical. Christianity is profoundly anthropological in its very essence, it is addressed personally to each human person, since the Gospel of Christ is revelation about Man, that tells everyone about his own nature, destiny and salvation. But, in spite of this, in the vast and ramified corpus of the Christian teaching, anthropology, the teaching on Man, was usually not in the foreground and did not take central place. On the contrary, in the long history of the Christian world, the place of anthropology was always, until very recently, among secondary chapters and subjects of the Christian doctrine, and its contents used to be rather scarce and obsolete. Undoubtedly, this secondary, subordinated and underdeveloped position of Christian anthropology contributed greatly in the processes of secularization and mass leaving of the Church in the last centuries. Important role in these processes was played by the widely popular view, according to which Christianity and the Church are far distanced from the situation and needs of the ordinary man, and have too little to say to him, because the Christian doctrine is just some abstract discourse on God. For instance, when the famous Religious-Philosophical Renaissance was starting in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. in Russia, leaders of this important movement criticized sharply all the edifice of the Christian theology and thought, stating that «Christianity did not discover what the Man is».

The answer to the paradox lies in the fact that anthropology in the standard sense of descriptive scientific knowledge about empiric man includes just a small and less important part of the whole anthropological message of Christianity. More important parts of this message are implicit: they are presented in the form and language, corresponding to other discourses, namely, theology (dogmatic theology, in the first place) and ascetics. These two discourses are created by Christianity itself and convey its basic and authentic elements, while the discourse of rational discursive science is not completely adequate for their expression. As a result, Christian anthropology turns out to possess the following triple composition:

- anthropology in the narrow sense of scientific knowledge about empiric man;
  - anthropology under the form of theology (mainly, dogmatic one);
  - anthropology in the form of ascetics,
- in which composition the principal components are the last two ones.

Under the form of theology there are, first of all, encoded in this form *ontological aspects* of anthropology. Here a definite connection between anthropology and ontology is fixed up, and a definite ontological contents of the phenomenon and situation of Man is postulated. As is well-known, the dogmatic basis of Christianity is twofold, and respectively, the anthropology that is encoded in Christian dogmatics is also twofold, being distributed between Trinitarian and Christological theology. Trinitarian theology formulates Christian concept of being as Absolute Being inherent in Holy Trinity that is God, Who possesses three Persons or Hypostases, and one Substance or Ousia, common to all Hypostases. First of all, anthropological contents is concentrated here in the concept of Divine Hypostasis, which was one of the basic sources for the elaboration of the idea of human personality in European thought. Moreover, Divine Being includes immanent dimensions of love and communion, which are also heavily loaded with anthropological meanings and implications. As for

Christological theology, it defines the nature and character of the fundamental God – Man relation, and in this case anthropological aspects and implications are even more profound. Christological dogmas formulate and even detail, in which way man's being and Divine being are connected, and tell about man's destination and final destiny of Mankind.

Christian ascetics is basically a practical discipline or practical art, in which a Christian devotes himself completely to the task of realizing his spiritual destination, as it is opened to him by Christ. It is evident that ascetical works represent some specific anthropological strategies, and all the sphere of ascetics is a kind of practical anthropology. Its contents can be seen as a direct development of the anthropological contents of Christology: the latter postulates a certain connection between Man and God, in the person of Christ, while ascetics tries to put to practice Christological postulates, creating new radical strategies of human existence. In this way ascetics develops many efficient techniques and methods of man's self-control and self-transformations and makes many discoveries concerning all systems and levels of human organization. However, its rich and valuable fruits remain, as a rule, in the form of purely practical, operational instructions, and very nontrivial work is needed in order to disclose and articulate their theological and anthropological meaning.

Finally, the last component, Christian anthropology in the narrow sense, in the process of its formation during the first centuries of the Christian era, modeled its discourse and drew heavily its contents on natural philosophy of its time, Late Antiquity. Both basic anthropological treatises of the Patristic period, «On Human Arrangement» by St Gregory of Nyssa and «On Human Nature» by Nemesius of Emesa, bear a strong stamp of dualistic anthropology of Ancient Greece and all the Greco-Roman world. This anthropology considers Mind and Body as two opposite principles in human nature, standing in different relation to ideal being and having different destiny; and such view contradicts the anthropological positions of the Bible and New Testament, which are distinctly holistic, i.e. see human nature in its relation to God as one and not separated. As a result, this part of Christian anthropology suffered serious shortcomings. Not only it was preserving many obsolete views rooted in rudimentary anthropological knowledge of Late Antiquity, but moreover it deviated in many subjects from holistic Biblical anthropology to dualistic Greek anthropology.

Nevertheless, in the course of history, Christian anthropology was becoming more and more firmly identified with just the anthropology in the narrow sense; and the reasons for it are easy to see. Facts and principles of theology, and especially dogmatic theology are expressed in a specific language, which is very far from being the plain speech about human person and human existence. As for ascetics, its conclusions are also encoded into a highly specific, indirect and sometimes even esoteric discourse; moreover, all its sphere was usually treated as marginal and eccentric and paid very little attention. Thus both in ascetics and theology anthropological message is only implicit. One can say that we have here just crypto-anthropology, which demands some special hermeneutic and interpreting procedures to be decoded. In the old times, such decoding was performed easily and almost automatically by the consciousness of almost any Christian believer, to say nothing of trained theologians. However, with the progress of secularization this decoding ability was getting more and more lost. This meant that mass consciousness, both Christian and secularized, was losing contact with the main part of the anthropological message of Christianity. The inevitable result of this was the mass dissatisfaction with this message, which we mentioned at the beginning. One can say that within the general crisis of Christianity, the separate, to some extent, crisis of Christian anthropology took place.

## **II. «Anthropologization of Theology» as a Strategy of Meeting the Challenge of Modernity**

We shall not discuss the broad processes of secularization and de-Christianization of society, which took place all over the Christian world and developed gradually into deep crisis of Christianity as one of the world religions. Instead of this, we restrict our subject to Christian anthropology; and we find that at least in this particular field the crisis was followed by strong and rather successful efforts to withstand it. These efforts amounted to a remarkable renewal and creative development of Christian anthropology in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the first decades of this century Christian consciousness became gradually aware of the crisis in all its profundity and acuteness. This awareness emerged and developed in all the three branches of Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy, quite independently. It gave birth to powerful processes of rethinking and reformulating the Christian doctrine and renewing the Church life. Both the course of these processes and their results were different in the three branches, but there were also important leading ideas and intuitions that were common to all. And in the first place among such common elements we should put the feeling that Christianity and Church should come up closer to problems of human person and human existence.

As we all know, Man is extremely many-sided, synthetic being, and his problems are extremely diverse. Hence this leading intuition could lead in quite different directions. One obvious direction was to put man's social problems at the foreground, since social conflicts were at that period very sharp, and it was habitual to consider Man as a social being mainly and social aspects in his personality and life as predominant. The development in this direction was very active; it included creation of many new forms of social activity of the Church, ecclesiastic organizations and Christian initiative groups. Especially large-scale initiatives emerged within the Roman Catholic Church, such as the movement of «priests-workers» in France in the 30s and 40s or «theology of liberation» in Latin America. All this large trend often called «Social Christianity» brought many practical fruits; but it also had its bounds. Spiritual and existential dimensions of Christian life were here shifted to the background and largely neglected, and theological reflection was restricted to a bare minimum.

Thus turning to human problems had to be realized also at more fundamental levels, not just social, but anthropological in the proper sense. This «anthropological turn» became probably the principal event in the history of Christian thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its leading idea was completely in accordance with our analysis in the first Section: it was understood that the anthropological message of Christian theology and doctrine has been lost, it was not seen and not perceived anymore by even educated Christians, to say nothing of non-educated. And it was decided that the right way to change this situation lied in systematic work of making explicit, bringing to the foreground and formulating anew, in clear and intelligible language, all the diverse anthropological contents concealed in Scriptures, Church dogmas, works of Church Fathers, spiritual experience and all the rich Christian inheritance. By means of such work, all the Christian theology would be represented as an anthropological discourse, speech addressed to human person and telling about his/her nature and situation, destination and problems. Quite naturally, for this trend or, as a matter of fact, this program the slogan «**Anthropologization of Theology**» was coined, which became popular in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.

One can say that the anthropologization of theology became the dominant trend in both Protestant and Eastern-Orthodox theology of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the last century (while in Roman-Catholic thought it did not gain such a prominent place). Of course, being an Eastern-Orthodox theologian, I will not describe here, in the Lutheran Seminary, achievements of the

anthropological thought of modern Protestant theology (although the comparison of the two approaches to the task of the anthropologization would be very interesting and useful to both traditions). I will only mention briefly the principal landmarks and most important names.

By right, we should consider Soren Kierkegaard as the forerunner of the anthropological turn in Protestant theology. It is difficult to imagine a mind, more persistently concentrated on human person and his/her situation in being, as well as more skilled in the tireless disclosing of all the twists and deadlocks in person's inner life and spiritual path; and what is most important, in all its winding constructions his thought never loses its genuine strive and orientation to Christ, remaining deeply Christian thought. But the decisive step, which opened widely the way to unimpeded anthropologization, has been made by Karl Barth, who propounded and elaborated in great detail the idea that Christian consciousness should learn to read Christology as anthropology – or, to put it, may be, more correctly – should be able to find full Christian anthropology in Christology. Next, very considerable progress in this way has been made by Rudolf Bultmann: his «existential interpretation» of the New Testament Revelation and then all basic concepts of Christian doctrine is, quite clearly, an anthropological interpretation at the same time; for instance, the state of faith is, according to this interpretation, the formation of a «new comprehension of the Self», that is radical transformation of human personality in its entirety. Moreover, Bultmann's thought developed in close contact with Heidegger's early philosophy, and due to this the all-embracing anthropological orientation of this philosophy as well as many of its basic anthropological ideas found their way into his theological work. Rich history of Protestant anthropology in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. includes many others valuable contributions, like those of Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, Wolfhart Pannenberg e.a. The development of the anthropologization went on almost uninterruptedly, and quite recently Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz, whose political theology is anthropologically based and anthropologically oriented throughout, added the fresh impetus to this development with their concept of «anthropological revolution».

Our main subject is, however, Eastern-Orthodox spirituality. After several decades of very fruitful development, which preceded the October Revolution of 1917, theology in Russia, together with all other forms of religious life, was heavily persecuted by the communist regime, and soon practically eliminated. However, many prominent religious philosophers and theologians emigrated from Russia or were exiled, and extremely rich religious and philosophical life in the Russian diaspora brought valuable fruits. Not only the famous religious philosophers of pre-revolutionary Russia, thinkers like Nicolas Berdyaev and Sergey Bulgakov, continued their work in the emigration, but, starting with the 30s and 40s, a new generation of young theologians was gradually forming, whose views diverged with those of the old leaders on many important points. Main figures among them were Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), who lived in France, Fr Georges Florovsky (1893-1979) and Fr John Meyendorff (1926-1992), who lived both first in Paris and then in the USA. It is in their works that a new school of thought in the Eastern-Orthodox theology emerged. Later on, their approach to Christian Tradition and Church dogmas, theology and anthropology won wide recognition, at first, among the theological community of the Eastern-Orthodox world, and then among theologians of other Christian confessions as well.

We do not plan to present here any systematic description of this new – and last, so far – stage in the history of Eastern-Christian thought. Restricting to anthropological aspects, we can say, however, that in these aspects this stage can be considered as the Eastern-Orthodox variant of the «anthropologization of theology». In fact, it was so characterized by Fr John Meyendorff himself, who wrote, for example: «Today the statement that theology in the modern world must take the form of anthropology became almost a commonplace. Eastern-Orthodox theologians can and even should accept such statement as a base for the dialogue; but they should stress at the same time that the anthropology in question must not ignore the

*openness of Man*»<sup>1</sup>. We give this quotation, because it contains not only the acceptance of the anthropologization, but also a certain reservation, emphasizing a very important element of the Eastern-Orthodox approach to the task of the anthropologization. For the Orthodox vision, the idea of human person as «open being» is of prime importance: human nature is open to the meeting with the Divine being, open to its own fundamental change, actual transcension of all its energies into Divine energies. And hence one key condition of the anthropologization of theology arises: Christian theology can be transformed without distortion into such anthropological discourse only, which takes into account this openness of Man – i.e., which is provided with meta-anthropological dimension and is *meta-anthropological* discourse at the same time.

It is here that the distinctions between the Protestant and Orthodox scenarios of the anthropologization begin. From the Orthodox point of view, the anthropologization of theology presented richly in modern Protestant thought very often did not meet this key condition. It was too ready to accept human nature in its present state and leave aside the meta-anthropological destination and orientation of this nature; and hence there was there the danger of the elimination or at least reduction of the meta-anthropological core of the Christian Revelation. For the Orthodox consciousness, the heart of the problem of the anthropologization of theology was exactly the balance between the anthropological and meta-anthropological: between turning to real, earthly human person and keeping in all its force Christ's eschatological message about victory over death.

The solution of the problem found by Orthodox theologians was perfectly in accordance with traditional principles of Orthodox thought. It was often stated that the base of this thought was the double authority: the authority of Patristic Tradition given in the works of Church Fathers, and the authority of direct spiritual experience, that is personal witness of Divine reality borne by saints and ascetics. Going a bit deeper, we can see this double authority as one: in fact, theology as such and, in the first place, Patristic theology, is considered in Orthodoxy as not a scholarly discipline or discourse, but *experiential* knowledge of Divine reality gained in higher steps of spiritual experience; so that Patristic Tradition may or even must be conceived as a union of Patristics and Ascetics.

It is exactly the authority and primacy of spiritual or ascetic experience that opens the way to the anthropologization of theology in Orthodoxy. The anthropological turn of theological thought took here the form of the turn to the profound study of the ancient Eastern-Orthodox ascetic tradition, bearing the name of **Hesychasm**.

### **III. Hesychasm as a common ground of the Eastern-Orthodox theology and anthropology**

Hesychasm is one of the very few ancient spiritual traditions that are alive and active to this day. It owes its name to the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning solitary and concentrated quietness. Its origins lie in the Early Christian desert monasticism of the Coptic Egypt and Palestine: it is now agreed by scholars that the famous Desert Fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> c., starting with St Anthony, were practicing exactly that kind of spiritual art, which was later developed into the hesychast spiritual practice called by ascetics themselves «*intellectual action*» (*praxis noera*, in Greek). The development took a long time, however. Any genuine spiritual practice is a sophisticated complex of very specific techniques, procedures and rules, the main part of which is invented specially for this practice; and the elaboration of such complex to its final mature form is always the work of many successive generations. After the initial period of desert hermits, the next important stage was the so called Sinaitic hesychasm of the 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fr John Meyendorff. Orthodox Theology in the modern world // Id. Orthodoxy in the modern world. Chalidze Publications. New-York, 1981. P.175. (Author's italics).

cc., the main area of which were the monasteries in the Sinai Peninsula separating Egypt and Palestine. The most famous of these monasteries, the monastery of St Catherine, existing to this day, was the place, where the first systematic treatise describing the hesychast practice has been written in the 7<sup>th</sup> c.: it was the «Ladder of Paradise» by St John Climacus, the abbot of the monastery. It is at this period that practice obtains its mature form. Its basic structure is the combination of the art of incessant prayer, the Jesus Prayer, and the technique of concentrated attention, which secures the uninterrupted character of the prayer process.

Then, after a few centuries of decline, a new period of flourishing came for Hesychasm in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> cc. At this time, principal hesychast centers were located in Byzantine Empire, and the most important of them was the big group of monasteries in the Athos Peninsula in Northern Greece. In the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> c. some elements in the experience of the Athonite hesychasts became the subject of sharp theological polemics that got the name of «Hesychast disputes». The hesychasts stated that at higher stages of their prayer practice they reached the actual contemplation-union with the Light of Tabor, i.e. Uncreated Divine Light seen by the apostles in the event of the Transfiguration of Christ. Their opponents held, however, against them that what they contemplated was only created, physical light, which implied, obviously, that hesychast practice did not actually include any meta-anthropological dimension. In a surprising way, this dispute over very specific details of mystical experience grew to a major state conflict, which lasted about 15 years and was completed by the victory of the hesychast party. What is more important for us, the profound theological analysis of the hesychast practice was performed during the polemics, mainly in the works by St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), the most outstanding figure in all the history of Orthodox theology after the age of Church Fathers.

The Hesychast Renaissance, as this period is often called, did not last long, however. After the fall of Byzantine Empire in 1453, Christian religion in all the Greek lands, which were now under the Turkish dominance, was heavily suppressed, and the life of the hesychast tradition continued chiefly in Russia, where Hesychasm had taken deep roots already in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> cc. (It should be mentioned, however, that Russian Hesychasm, in contrast to Byzantine, did not include theological reflection.) Hesychasm has also spread its branches to all other countries of Eastern Christianity; but nevertheless, in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> cc. the tradition was in decline everywhere. Still it was only temporary decline, and in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. the new period of the active development starts. One of the main factors in the reanimation of the tradition was the publication in 1782 of the famous «Philokalia» («Love to the Beautiful», in Greek), the large and masterly done selection of hesychast texts, which had and still continues to have enormous influence all over the Orthodox world.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> c. Hesychasm flourishes again in Russia. It is practiced in many monasteries and sometimes even among lay people, and there appear great hesychast teachers like St Seraphim of Sarov and St Theophan the Recluse. New forms of hesychast spirituality emerge, which show the tendency of the tradition to spread its message to the surrounding world. The most important of them was the so-called eldership, that is open contacts of the most experienced hesychast monks with all laymen looking for spiritual advice and direction. The main center of the eldership, the famous Optina Pustyn' monastery, attracted many thousands of people from all the Russian Empire. This period of fruitful spiritual work, which is also often called the Hesychast Renaissance, was broken down by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. However, there remained important hesychast centers out of Russia, first of all, in Athos, and the life of the tradition continued.

The present period in the history of Hesychasm, embracing the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., is characterized by interesting new features. The hesychast art of prayer continues to be practiced according to its strict and unchanging rules; but noticeable changes took place in the situation of the ancient tradition in the society and culture. May be, in the first time since the Byzantine Hesychast Renaissance of the 14<sup>th</sup> c. it is widely recognized that Hesychasm is the

very core of the Orthodox spirituality; and moreover, it is discovered that its rich experience is of big value not only for theologians, but also philosophers, psychologists and other scholars. It was never studied as intensely as nowadays, and these studies do not stop bringing us new discoveries.

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Coming back to theological and anthropological problems, we can see at once that Hesychasm is indeed such a field, in which theology and anthropology meet and almost merge together. It is spiritual or mystico-ascetic practice, and, as I explain in my other Hongkong lecture, spiritual practice is such anthropological strategy that is oriented to a goal, which does not belong to the horizon of man's empiric existence. This goal is, in other words, meta-anthropological, and so it obtains its characteristics not from usual experience of empiric being, but from basic postulates of the religious tradition, to which the corresponding practice belongs. In the case of Hesychasm, the goal is defined by the Orthodox doctrine as deification (theosis, in Greek), which is conceived as the perfect union of all man's energies with the Divine Energy (God's grace). This concept has a specific dual nature: it belongs to dogmatic theology, but at the same time it represents the goal, to which ascetic works are oriented and which they approach actually, according to all the rich corpus of ascetic texts with the first-hand descriptions of hesychast experience. Thus it is both theological and anthropological concept.

The final goal of the hesychast practice is not the only point of it, where theological and anthropological discourses become inseparable of each other. As the title of the ancient hesychast treatise tells, all the way of the practice as a whole has the structure of a ladder; and the ascent by this Spiritual Ladder, especially in its higher steps, is only possible with the participation of God's grace, or Divine Energy. And hesychasts discovered experientially that the key problem of the ascetic works is the transformation of man's energies to such special organization or regime, when all these energies are coordinated or coherent with Divine Energy, thus collaborating with it and letting it to act in the man freely. This coordination and collaboration of the two ontologically different energies, Divine and human, was called **synergy** (synergia) in Byzantine theology. It is an important concept, which has the same dual nature, uniting in itself theology and ascetics, theology and anthropology.

It has also rich history in Christian thought. Although the concept as such is specific to Orthodox theology, but the notion of energy correlates closely with the notion of will, and the problem of the relationship between the human and Divine will is one of the oldest in Christian theology, which was intensely discussed long before the separation of Eastern and Western Churches. But now I will only mention one episode, in which the Lutheran position in the problem is elucidated. It is well-known that the problem of God's grace and human will was discussed in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. in the so-called synergistic disputes between protestant theologians, including Luter himself. Eventually, the viewpoint which was called «synergism» and defended, in particular, by Melanchton, was rejected, and the disputes have been ended with the so-called «Formula of the Agreement» in 1577. But the interesting point is that if we compare the positions of the disputing sides with the Orthodox theory of synergy, we find that the position, which was called «synergism» is very far from this theory. On the other hand, the position, very close to the Orthodox one, was presented by Erasmus of Rotterdam, the famous humanist and freethinker, and formulated clearly in his treatise «Diatribes» (1524), in which he polemized with Luter. Another Western theologian, whose views were quite close to the Orthodox concept of synergy, was the famous mystic and Church leader St Bernard of Clairvaux. These incidental historical remarks show that hesychast studies may provide fresh look at some old interconfessional divisions, disclosing unexpected points of resemblance.

As for our main subject, the examples of the two key hesychast concepts, theosis and synergia, demonstrate clearly enough that in the study of the hesychast practice the anthropological turn of Orthodox theology does really take place. This is the Orthodox scenario of the anthropologization of theology, and it is evident that in this scenario the meta-anthropological and mystical dimensions of Christian message are not lost.