

Hermeneutics of Human Body According to Hesychast Anthropology¹

The subject of human body in all its aspects is undoubtedly one of the most topical and actively debated in modern society and culture. Culture is now as much body-oriented as it was spiritually oriented in former times, and its interest in everything concerning human body borders on obsession. Obviously, such an important trend of modern life and modern man could not avoid the attention of Christian thought. In the last decades an impressive collection of texts on theology of the body has been produced. Although it belongs mostly to Western Christianity, the Orthodox contribution is also considerable, including some monographs, like, e.g., *Corps de mort et de gloire* (1995) by Olivier Clément.

For the Orthodox vision of the body problem, the Orthodox ascetic tradition, the hesychasm, is of special significance. First of all, due to the efforts of many Orthodox scholars, like V.Lossky, Fr Dumitru Staniloae, Fr John Meyendorff, Metropolitan John Zezioulas, O.Clément, C.Yannaras e.a., the hesychast tradition is now recognized as the true core of Orthodox spirituality, where the authentic experience of striving to and joining with Christ is preserved and reproduced identically. Furthermore, the hesychast practice is exactly the sphere, in which Orthodox consciousness deals directly with the human body, discovering experientially what is its place and role in spiritual life. For many centuries, mystical experience and ascetic *ethos* of hesychasm served as the ground, basing on which the Orthodox attitude to human body as well as all problems concerning man's bodily nature was formed up. Thus the present "neopalamitic" period of Orthodox theology with its boom of hesychast studies produced numerous works touching upon the treatment of human body in hesychasm. As a rule, these works concentrate on a few principal points such as:

— contrasting "holistic" biblical anthropology inherent in hesychasm with "dualistic" platonic and neoplatonic anthropology. Cf., e.g.: "A body-soul division of a platonic type has no place within Christian tradition. The Bible sees the human person in holistic terms."²;

— describing physical techniques which take part of the famous "psychosomatic method" of hesychast prayer;

— discussing specific somatic effects which take place at higher steps of the hesychast ladder of spiritual ascension and are basically some drastic transformations of perceptive modalities, resulting in the formation of new sense organs called "spiritual senses".

As for the systematic presentation of the conception of the body in hesychast anthropology, it is still virtually absent. Usually, it is just the idea of the "apology of the body" that is stressed in this conception: hesychast attitude to human body is characterized as "positive" one, since it integrates the body into the economy of the communion with God, according to Palama's words: "Together with the soul, the body follows spiritual path"; and it is opposed to "negative" attitude, typical of Greco-Roman paganism and professing disdain to the body. Taking this into account, we thought it useful to present, if only in outline, a general reconstruction of the hesychast vision of the human body, provided with a well-defined methodological and hermeneutical basis. Such general approach will make it possible for us to achieve more substantial conclusions. Our reconstruction will display strategies and structures of the hesychast integration of the body into the holistic transformation of the human being. And we shall try to show that at least some of

¹ The talk at the International Conference, Lebanon, December 3-5, 2007.

² *Kallistos of Diokleia*. Praying with the body: the hesychast method and non-Christian parallels // *Sobornost*, incorporating *Eastern Churches Review*. 1992, v. 14(2), p.6.

these strategies could be helpful to modern man in his strivings to reassess his bodily nature and build up a new relationship with his body.

1. Principles of hesychast hermeneutics of the body. Any comprehensive conception of the body should start with the hermeneutical question: *how to read the language of the body?* Which meanings, and in which way, should one associate with the life of the body, with bodily acts, motions and other manifestations? In no way does hesychasm disregard such hermeneutical questions. Hesychast thinking could even be called hermeneutically oriented thinking, it endeavors to assign meanings to all phenomena of human experience. This orientation reveals itself clearly already in the earliest hesychast texts, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (IV-V cc.). In fact, all these collections of brief stories from the life of Desert Fathers can be conceived as books of hermeneutical exercises: each story is a case told in such a way that it is up to a listener or reader to discover or build up its meaning. During the next centuries, the hesychast tradition developed gradually its own original system of hermeneutics. Of course, it is not hermeneutics of the classical type found in European science, e.g., in Dilthey, where it represents the discourse and method providing the interpretation of “historical texts” and “living expressions fixed up in a written form”. However, it fits more general and modern idea of hermeneutics developed by Paul Ricoeur.

Contents subjected to hermeneutical processing are here elements or blocks (“cases”, episodes) of the experience of hesychast practice. The horizon of ascetic consciousness coincides with the world of ascetic tradition, and hence the system of meanings, in terms of which these contents must be interpreted, is hesychast anthropology. It is essentially practical anthropology, which represents the description of the ascetic (hesychast) mode of existence, *bios hesychastos*. This hesychast life is, in its turn, the process of holistic self-transformation of the human being in his energies, directed to actual transcension into a different, Divine mode of being. This holistic process is usually called the “spiritual process”, though it is an obvious *abus de langage*. It is structured as a ladder (the famous Ladder of Paradise by St John the Sinaite) with the steps going from conversion and *metanoia*, via “unseen warfare” or the fight with the passions, *hesychia*, taking one’s mind down into the heart, *apatheia*, etc. to *theosis*. Each step is a certain regime or mode of activity of the whole human being; or, in other words, a certain configuration of human energies of all kinds, intellectual, psychic and somatic. From the viewpoint of the tradition, to identify the step, to which a certain piece of ascetic experience belongs, means to give the complete characterization of this experience. Hence there follows the first basic principle of hesychast hermeneutics: *the interpretation of an arbitrary element of hesychast experience means its process localization, i.e. its attribution to a definite step of the spiritual process or the combination of steps or else its rejection as something alien to the process*. This interpretation, or hermeneutical act as such, is carried out with the help of further general principles, of which we point out just the main ones.

1) the interpretation resorts to the three sources of hermeneutical authority: Holy Scripture; ascetic texts; living experienced teachers of the practice;

2) in order to conceive the true sense of hesychast experience and achieve its authentic interpretation, one should share this experience, if only to some extent, or have a kindred experience;

3) reliable interpretation and comprehension of hesychast experience cannot be achieved by abstract reasoning; the access to it is only through practical contacts with it and practical learning of its elements.

This set of principles shows that there is here hermeneutics of an original and quite modern type, dialogical, conciliatory and practical. Another important distinction of this hermeneutics is its integration into the spiritual process: it accompanies its course so that on each step the

interpretation of lived experience is a part of this experience, necessary for the further advancement.

Hesychast hermeneutics of the body emerges, when these general principles are applied to the bodily dimensions of hesychast experience. In the next section we shall present its principal results; but, before doing this, we must mention some key factors, which determine the role of the body not only in hesychasm, but in any spiritual practice.

First of all, the Kantian question should be asked: if the ascension to theosis demands a fundamental transformation of our body, *how is such a transformation possible?* It is a most special transformation directed to actual transcendence of the human being, and we find that there are two premises for its possibility, one of them ontological and other anthropological. As stated by Orthodox theology, theosis is accomplished by Divine energy, or uncreated grace of God, with which our created energies enter into contact and collaboration, according to the paradigm of synergy (*synergia*). Hence it follows the ontological premise: the participation of the body in theosis is possible only if its energies can also reach synergy, together with all other energies of the human person. According to the rich database of hesychast tradition, this premise takes place in hesychast practice; so speaks, e.g., one of great hesychasts of the last century St Silouan of Athos: “The soul perceives grace of God in its body too”³. As for the anthropological premise, it is brought forth by the fact that any spiritual practice must rely on a definite subordination between the structural levels of the human being. The self-transformation sought for in the practice is holistic, but all its course, its strategy and organization have to be determined and put into effect by human consciousness. Hence the participation of the body in theosis is possible only if the body is subordinated to the consciousness to the necessary extent. Of course, such subordination does exist, and is constantly used in everyday human activities; but it is its extent that is crucial. In spiritual practices the ability of consciousness to control and transform the sphere of man’s bodily activities is specially trained and can be enhanced drastically (which is demonstrated most strikingly by such practices as Yoga or Taoism). Moreover, at higher grades of the spiritual process, which are close to *synergia*, the effects of grace of God promote even more radical changes in this sphere (we shall discuss them in Section 2). As a result, the anthropological premise of the practice takes place too, and all the steps of the hesychast Ladder can be climbed successfully, as the tradition and its experience tell us.

But, all this notwithstanding, the body resists efficiently the last and most important changes necessary for theosis. These last changes should actualize ontological transcendence by abolishing the fundamental predicates of mortality and finiteness of our mode of being. In terms of our bodily constitution, these predicates are secured by our genetic program, the Code. The power of the Code is so far unshaken, and in the final of any life, including the life devoted to hesychast practice, there comes death. Orthodox theology conveys this situation by means of the thesis that the fullness of theosis is unattainable in empiric existence and belongs to the horizon of eschatology. In this unattainability of theosis the body plays the key role. By scriptural formula, it is “the body of death”, and Metropolitan John Zezioulas resumed its role in human existence in his aphorism: “The body is a tragic instrument”.

2. A short guide to the bodily dimension of the hesychast Ladder. In its actual contents, hesychast hermeneutics of the body has natural structure implied by the stepwise structure of the spiritual process. As said above, each step of the process is a certain mode of activity of the whole human being and, in particular, human body. We must admit *a priori* that the body manifests itself in a new way in each step, acquiring new functions and new organization of its energies. Hence hermeneutical act should proceed as a step by step procedure, revealing bodily

³ *Archim. Sophrony*. Starets Silouan. Moscow 1991. P.446.

contents of each step and reconstructing eventually the bodily dimension of all the hesychast Ladder as the way of ascension of human corporality.

The stepwise structure of the Ladder is not fixed up in a unique way, the number of steps and their contents are varying in various descriptions of hesychast practice. There is no doubt, however, that all the steps can be grouped into three big blocks, having definite functions in the ascension to theosis: *the block of the take-off* – *the block of the “ontological mover”* – *the block of the telos*. Following each other, they cover all the Ladder from the foot to the top, and we shall describe briefly their bodily contents.

The starting block of the Ladder includes the parts of the hesychast practice called often *Spiritual Gate* (the initial steps of the Ladder, those of *metanoia* and repentance) and *Unseen Warfare* (the struggle against the passions). In this block, the ascetical work is mainly psychological: one must develop the attitude of extreme repugnance for one’s own sins, aversion and rejection of all the worldly way of life. But such an attitude should become the beginning or “gate” of the holistic process, in which not just psychology, but human nature as such has to be transformed entirely and converted into a different nature. Due to this, hesychast practice is holistic in these steps too, and it includes, in particular, a rich repertory of bodily practices. The struggle against the passions (among which there is a large group of so called passions of the body⁴) needs such practices as well. Serving the ascetical goal of rooting out the enslavement to sinful passions and attachment to worldly values, all these bodily practices are mainly in the nature of self-restriction and self-punishment: many kinds of renunciation (defined as “the war with the body and battle against the belly” by St John Climacus⁵), flagellation, fixing up heavy burdens on one’s body, weeping (tears of repentance have many forms, and hesychasm develops whole theology of tears), etc. Asceticism of Ancient Syria was famous for its especially severe forms of self-torture. However, hesychast teachers stressed always that all such techniques are only auxiliary and should not reach extreme forms dangerous for life and diverting from spiritual tasks.

The next, central block has to create the unique dynamics of the spiritual process, or *sui generis* “ontological mover”, making it possible to move up from one step to the next one, advancing to ontological transcension. It was discovered by hesychasts that the role of such mover can be played successfully by the union of two practices, the famous dyad *prosokhe* – *proseuche*, attention and prayer (the latter taking the form of the incessant Jesus prayer). “Attention and prayer, when they are permanently joined together, perform something similar to Elijah’ chariot of fire, lifting one who has gained them to heavenly heights”⁶. What are bodily aspects of this hesychast chariot? Obviously, attention hardly needs such aspects, but the case of the prayer is different. In any regular prayer practice there are some rules concerning the body, and in spiritual practices such rules are especially sophisticated. In hesychasm, they are basically of the two kinds, the regulations relating to the postures of the prayer and rhythms of the breathing. They took their full and mature form in the late-Byzantine hesychasm of the 13-14th cc. and were much discussed in the so called Hesychast disputes of the mid-14th c. What is important to note about them, is the obvious fact: the presence of the detailed instructions for the involvement of the body in the prayer means that all the human being starts to be (re)organized in an integral system, all parts of which are actively involved into the spiritual process. Such total reorganization can be realized only by the mind, and this means, in its turn, that *the hesychast mind develops the ability to control the activities of all the levels of the human being, directing and changing these activities according to the demands of the spiritual process*.

⁴ According to St John of Damascus, they include gluttony, greed, licentiousness, unchastity, and every kind of gratification of the whims of the flesh; etc.

⁵ The Ladder of Paradise, XV,17.

⁶ St Philotheos Sinaite. Sorok glav o trezvenii (Forty Chapters on Watchfulness) // Dobrotolyubie (Philokalia). Vol.3. Ed.3. Moscow 1992. P.414. (In Russian).

This special ability of the mind is the key condition of the progress of the spiritual process. It was first described clearly by St Gregory Palamas. He fully appreciated its importance and characterized it as a specific paradigm of human consciousness, by means of which the holistic transformation of all the energies of the human being is performed: “Struggling the law of sin (Rom 8,2), we drive it out of the body and install there the mind (*nous*) as a bishop (*episkopos*)... through whom we prescribe the laws to every force of the soul and every member of the body... To the senses we prescribe, what and to what extent to perceive, calling this law the “contenance”; to the incensive part of the soul we give the best arrangement named “love”; and we perfect the intelligent part as well, doing away with everything preventing our thought to strive to God. This part of the noetic law we call the “watchfulness”⁷. He who succeeds in all this, St Gregory says, “will receive and see in himself God’s grace”⁷. The “noetic law”, which is described here, is evidently a certain paradigm, alternative to the old law or paradigm, in which human mind and consciousness used to work. This new paradigm prescribes the integration of all human energies into a coherent ensemble directed from one center, which is the mind, and subjected entirely to the task of the ascension to theosis. We call this paradigm discovered in hesychast practice and described by Palamas the “paradigm of the mind-bishop (*nous – episkopos*)”.

It is not simply a paradigm of consciousness, but also a paradigm, which determines the destiny of the body in hesychast practice. According to this paradigm, the practice creates new connections between different levels of the human organization, due to which energetic structures of the human being change their character. In particular, the bodily energies intertwine inseparably with those of the other levels, so that the body becomes more and more penetrated and directed by the energies of the mind, getting more and more integrated into the spiritual process.

Due to this integration, in the next, final block of the practice actual transformations of human corporality become possible. Not only in hesychasm, but also in other spiritual traditions ascetic experience testifies that such transformations begin, first of all, in the sphere of sense organs. Our hermeneutics provides a clear interpretation of this fact. In the higher, elevated steps of the Ladder the hesychast reaches *synergia*, the state, in which his energies enter into contact with Divine energies. Such contact can be interpreted in terms of human perceptions: one can say that in *synergia* the human being develops a new meta-anthropological perceptive modality, namely, the ability to perceive Divine energies, which can be called “synergetic perception”. By virtue of the integration of the body into the spiritual process, the “old”, usual perceptive modalities should be in conformity with this new modality, obeying it and forming part of it, so that a new perceptive system should emerge. And indeed, the emergence of such system is a phenomenon, well-known for a long time from the experience of many mystical schools and spiritual traditions. It is exactly this phenomenon that takes place in the hesychast visions of Uncreated Light, which have been the subject of Hesychast disputes of the 14th c. In the hesychast tradition these new perceptions are called “spiritual senses”⁸. They include, in the first place, the sight, but a bit more rarely the sources mention also the hearing, the sense of touch (“spiritual warmth”), and even, in a few cases, the levitation and other effects beyond the sphere of perceptions. In their nature and properties “spiritual senses” are radically different from the usual sense organs, representing first elements of starting ontological transformation of the human being.

From this brief survey some general principles of the hesychast vision of human corporality stand out. First of all, this vision is characterized by refusal of any sweeping value judgments, were it negative or positive. For Christian worldview, there is the only ontological

⁷ St Gregory Palamas. *Triady v sashchitu svyashchennobezmolstvuyushchikh* (Triads in Defense of Saint Hesychasts). I, 2, 2. Moscow, 1995. P.42. (In Russian).

⁸ For their discussion see, e.g.: B.Fraigneau-Julien. *Les sens spirituels et la vision de Dieu selon Symeon le Nouveau Theologien*. Paris, 1985.

opposition, *created vs. uncreated (Divine)*, while the opposition *body (flesh) vs. mind (spirit)* is not ontological, both its poles belonging to created being. In this view, any element or level of human organization is neither good nor bad in itself, but can be used in good as well as bad ways. It is the patristic paradigm of “usage and abusage” (*chresis – parachresis*), which turns up often in Greek Fathers, both in dogmatic and ascetic discourse. Maximus the Confessor provided theological grounds for this paradigm and based on it his theory of the conversion of passions from evil into salutary forces. In the next stage, late-Byzantine hesychasm, deepening and generalizing it, develops on its basis a strikingly modern, dynamic and dialectical anthropology. Accepting that the human being as a whole, all its levels included, has the task of the ascension to theosis, Palamas treats this being as a changing configuration of energies, which should be entirely rearranged by means of the *mind-bishop* (the latter being constituted by Divine energies). Such rearrangement means turning to the right usage (*chresis*) of all human energies, which shows the connection between the two main principles of hesychast anthropology. Coming back to bodily energies, one can say that their right usage is the perfect following of the instructions of the *mind-bishop* and complete integration into the spiritual process. “There are joint activities of the soul and the body, which ... rise the body up to the spiritual, leading it high upwards... These spiritual energies go from the mind to the body, and the latter becomes transfigured and deified through them”⁹.

3. Politics of the body in hesychasm and modernity. Showing closest attention to the body, modernity developed great many trends, strategies and techniques concerning our bodily constitution. Main phenomena characterizing modern attitudes to the human body include genetic experiments, which can change human biology beyond recognition, gender revolution, which changes the basic patterns of biological reproduction, medical technologies like transplantation and euthanasia (and hot discussions of related bioethical problems), cruel experiments with the body in avant-garde art, psychedelic subcultures, popularity of extreme bodily practices and practices of transgression, suicidal terrorism, etc. etc. They are strikingly diverse, but nevertheless it is easy to notice something common in them all, some common quality, which can be defined as the radical and extreme character of the anthropological experience involved. They all can be considered as practices, bringing the human person and its body to the limits of their possibilities, the borders of the horizon of human consciousness and experience. The list of characteristic phenomena leads us to a quite definite conclusion: the dominant anthropological trend of modernity is striving to extreme experience of all kinds, irrespective of its possible dangers and risks as well as its ethical or unethical, humane or inhumane nature. And the realization of this striving looks as a rather disoriented, chaotic and destructive activity.

Now, what has the hesychast politics of the body to do with all that? Contrary to what might be expected, this politics is not the polar opposite to that of modernity. One can say by right that the hesychast body strategy is also the striving to extreme experience: obviously, the experience of approaching actual ontological transcension is not just extreme, but extreme *par excellence*. In no way is it a conservative strategy, stating that our present bodily constitution is untouchable and should be left as it is forever. On the contrary, it is a strategy of transformation; and hence a constructive dialogue between the body strategies of hesychasm and modernity is possible. Sure, they are the strategies of radically different nature. It looks as if for a present-day human, his/her body became suddenly a kind of a new land, and he/she set actively about to conquer and colonize it. In hermeneutical terms, it means that the human person rejected the old systems of bodily meanings, thus losing the comprehension of his/her body, and tries now to discover or invent some new system. To do this, he/she finds it necessary to deconstruct his/her corporality completely, subject the body to all extreme trials, dissect it up to the last limit. The

⁹ St Gregory Palamas. Op.cit. II, 2,12. P.169. (In Russian).

only regulating principle of such strategy is the relentless and unrestricted striving to the extreme, and hence it is basically destructive and bringing forth many dangerous risks.

As for the hesychast body strategy, it includes deconstruction too, since *nous* – *episkopos* should take any block of our bodily constitution (in its energetical projection) and revise all its links within this constitution. However, in this case the deconstruction is just an aspect of the strategy, which, taken as a whole, should realize not deconstruction, but (re)integration of bodily energies into a new mode of organization of all the human being. As a result, the extreme experience is of different nature here. It is not disoriented and destructive experience of dissected body, but the experience of the body, which keeps its wholeness and ascends, not as a part, but as a special mode of expression of the whole human being, to its transfiguration into the “body of glory”.

Hence our final conclusions can be drawn. We see that general principles, on which hesychast body politics are based, the paradigms of the mind-bishop and usage-abusage, are efficient regulative and corrective means for extreme experience. They guard it from taking destructive and chaotic forms, and separate strategies, leading to the transfigured body, from those leading to the disfigured body. And thus they represent valuable resource, which the modern man can take from the ancient Orthodox tradition.