

**EASTERN-CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE AND RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY:
BASIC STRUCTURES, MODERN PROBLEMS**

1. Eastern-Orthodox spirituality in its principal 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 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 essentially 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 «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. Here even the Church Fathers who have written basic theological texts, acknowledged the primacy of the personal experience of communion with Christ. Thus St. Gregory of Nazianzus writes: “Not everybody can and is allowed to philosophize about God... Only those are able to do this who spend their life in contemplating God and first of all who have purified their soul and body”¹.

Let us consider 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

¹ St. Gregory of Nazianzus. Homily 27. Complete works in 2 vols. St.Petersburg, s.a. Vol.1. P.386 (in Russian).

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. Looking for the answer to it, religious consciousness discovered that this answer 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 represent 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 for martyrdom deliberately, to organize it, so to say, on one's own. 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. And for early

Christians the creation of the ascetic and monastic tradition was exactly the solution of this problem. From the very beginning of the Christian asceticism, the ascetic way was considered as a lot that is in the direct succession and the closest connection with martyrdom. The idea of such connection can be found in authors of all periods of Orthodox asceticism, from St. Isaac the Syrian (7th c.) to St. Ignatius Bryanchaninov (19th c.) who wrote: “Monasticism and martyrdom represent the same spiritual lot in different forms”².

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 transcendence 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.

Hence it follows 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 trying 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. To cut it short, it demanded 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 the deserts of Coptic Egypt became widely known as the place where hundreds and thousands of people retired from worldly life. This 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 side 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

² St. Ignatius Bryanchaninov. On Monasticism. Vol.1. St. Petersburg, 1905. P.469. (In Russian.)

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 describing precisely all the situation and all procedures, which are necessary in order 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 draw 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 goal³.

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 identical preservation and 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 cultivated in this tradition is called the hesychast practice. 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 creation of the *Organon* took about one thousand years of work of the hesychast tradition, roughly from the 4th to the 14th c. The last period of this work which took place in

³ The fact that the organization of mystico-ascetic experience represents a certain *Organon* has been first pointed out in my book “The Phenomenology of Asceticism” (1998). The detailed reconstruction of the *Organon* corresponding to the Eastern-Orthodox ascetic tradition is also performed in this book.

Byzantium in the 13th – 14th cc. is of special importance. It was a period of flourishing of the tradition which is now called Hesychast Renaissance. As a result of the so called Hesychast Controversy, the sharp polemics about the true meaning of hesychast experience, hesychasm developed profound theological interpretation of its practice. This interpretation belongs chiefly to st. Gregory Palamas (1296-1357) who created theology of Divine energies. This theology was then approved by the Church Council and provided an important link between the ascetic tradition and Orthodox theology created by Eastern Church Fathers. Now the core of Orthodox spirituality for which I use the term *Eastern Christian discourse* took the accomplished form of a triple unity:

classical patristics – theology of Divine energies – hesychasm.

This form conveys very clearly the key feature of Orthodox spirituality, the inseparable union of theological thought and mystico-ascetic experience of personal communion with God.

II. Russian thought in its relation to the Eastern Christian discourse

Russian culture took its initial shape in the transference of Eastern Christian discourse from Byzantium to Rus'. Thus it inherited some specific features of this discourse important for the development of philosophical thought. These features are rooted in the key Orthodox principle of the primacy of spiritual experience. During the initial period of Christianity, from the 1st through the 3rd centuries, stoic and platonic philosophy provided Christians with a framework for understanding Christian truth. But in the 4th c. due to the work of the Greek Church Fathers a new discourse arose, that of dogmatic theology. It differs sharply from philosophy since it is based on two specific kinds of experience, both cultivated by Christianity and both non-philosophical: the collective "conciliary" experience, which is the source of the dogmatic formulas arrived at by the Church Councils; and the individual experience of communion with God rooted in hesychast practice.

In Eastern Christianity the term "theology" means not "theoretical discourse about God", but rather a direct rendering or expression of the experience of human ascent to God⁴. The Orthodox theology of spiritual experience (both conciliary and personal) had always been the dominant discourse of Byzantine thought. It raised much stronger obstacles to the development of philosophy than did the kind of theology cultivated in the West. Thus, Byzantium had nothing like Scholasticism; indeed, it was not until the 14th c., just a century before Byzantium's collapse, that strong intellectual movement generated by Hesychast Controversy created an opening for the development of Eastern Christianity's own original philosophy. This opening was exploited by certain Eastern Christian thinkers, but not to any great extent.

In Russia, besides these features, there were additional barriers to the development of philosophy. For example, in early Russia classical Greek philosophy was extremely little studied,

since Greek was almost an unknown language. Moreover, Russian religious consciousness which was mostly dominated by ethical and ascetic motifs paid little attention to the theological and even less to philosophical content of the Eastern Christian discourse. Thus, the systematic formation of philosophical thought in Russia began only in the context of the westernized culture that gradually emerged in the country during the 17th and especially 18th cc. But the westernization never gained absolute dominance, and although the influence of the roots of Russian thought in the Eastern Christian discourse became weak and almost unnoticeable at times, it never disappeared completely. From the time of its birth during the dispute between the Slavophiles and Westernizers, modern Russian philosophy always saw itself as confronting a dilemma – whether to adopt the western philosophical discourse or the Eastern Christian discourse. And its contents, its life, its ideas always reflected this conflict; so that as late as in 1929, when Russian philosophy has already produced great many original works, the following radical opinion was still possible: “All real achievements made by Russian specialists in philosophy should in fact be included in the history of Western and mostly German thought”⁵.

Russian philosophy was gradually emerging in the first decades of the 19th c., and in the 1830s it entered a period of remarkable development. To the end of the 1830s two ideological parties of Slavophiles and Westernizers have already been formed which had opposing views of the differences between Russia and the West and hence of the tasks and strategies of Russian social and cultural development. Both parties besides hot social and political debates were engaged into intense philosophical work concentrated chiefly on such subjects as philosophy of history and philosophy of personality. The most significant achievements of this work were Khomiakov’s theory of conciliarity (*sobornost’*), Herzen’s conception of personality and (what is especially important for our theme) the unfinished philosophical project by Ivan Kireyevsky, which raised (but in no way solved) the problem of creating an authentic Russian philosophy based not on European metaphysics but on the principles of Eastern Christian discourse. Kireyevsky’s reflection on the Eastern Christian discourse displayed its philosophical aspects and implications and stressed specially the immanent, never obsolete role of the “philosophy of the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church” thus anticipating directly the ideas of neopatristic synthesis by Father George Florovsky in the mid-20th c. According to Kireyevsky, “The distinctive feature of Orthodox thought, which issues from reason’s particular relationship to faith, should determine ... the direction of our unique type of education”⁶. Slavophiles thought over a new type of philosophy: contemporary philosophy that provides solutions to “questions of the day” and is built upon the foundations of Russia’s spiritual tradition, being therefore distinct from classical European metaphysics. However, such philosophy was not yet created in their work.

As everybody knows, it was Vladimir Soloviev who has presented the first full-blooded Russian philosophical system. Methodologically and epistemologically this system was completely

⁴ Cf., e.g.: “Theology is not some thoughts of human mind or the result of some critical studies, but the report about the being into which the man was introduced by Holy Spirit”. Hieromonk Sophronius. The Elder Silouan. Moscow, 1991. P.153. (In Russian.)

⁵ L.P.Karsavin. Philosophy and V.K.P. // Eurasia (Paris), 1929, 6 of April.

⁶ I.V.Kireyevsky. On the possibility and necessity of new principles for philosophy // Id. Selected articles. Moscow, 1984. P.262.

within the Western philosophical tradition; it also accepted ontological foundations of this tradition, having especially close ties with classical German idealism. But still his philosophy did not join any concrete direction of Western thought. It had its independent tasks and themes rooted in the authentic experience of Russian history and Russian mentality. By its nature it represented a synthesis and compromise between Russian and Orthodox spiritual and existential sources and Western ontological basis and philosophical framework. A happy discovery of Soloviev was the key concept, which could express this double nature most adequately. The famous concept of All-Unity combined a strong affinity for Orthodox spirituality and Russian culture with solid basis in almost all formations of European philosophy since Greek antiquity. Thus Soloviev's system attracted many followers, and soon it was developed by them into what is now known as the Russian metaphysics of All-Unity. In its turn, this metaphysics becomes the core of active philosophical movement called later the Russian Religious-philosophical renaissance. In the beginning of the 20th c. within a very short period an unprecedented number of bright talented thinkers appear: brothers Sergey and Evgeny Troubetzkoy (Soloviev's close friends), Rozanov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Berdyaev, Bulgakov, Florensky, Lossky, Frank and many others. Many of them develop major philosophical systems, and this is how the phenomenon of Russian religious philosophy forms up, which takes quite noticeable place in European philosophy of the last century.

Undoubtedly, philosophical work of the Russian Religious-philosophical renaissance brought rich and valuable fruits providing philosophical expression to many important contents of the Eastern Christian discourse. However, another considerable part of these contents was left out because it could not be understood on the classical basis used by the metaphysics of All-Unity. The framework of classical metaphysics turned out to be inadequate for the interpretation of some vital aspects of Russian and Orthodox spirituality – above all, anthropological aspects connected with the quintessential Orthodox experience of the communion with and ascent to God as this experience is presented in hesychast practice. Philosophical process during the Silver Age was evolving with surprising intensity, and the lack of connection with the experiential sources of Eastern Christian discourse was already felt and noticed by Russian thinkers before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

The first serious manifestation of the approaching turn of Russian religious thought to these sources was the attempt of several notable philosophers (Florensky, Bulgakov, Ern, Losev) to develop philosophical foundations of the so called Onomatodoxy or Name-Praising (*imyaslavie*), a new current within hesychasm, which spread at the beginning of the 20th c. in some monasteries in the Caucasus and on Mount Athos and professed special adoration to the name of God. To explain the practice of the Onomatodoxy these philosophers found it necessary to use palamitic theology of Divine energies, but at the same time they were preserving the framework and basic concepts of the metaphysics of All-Unity. Their work produced a number of in-depth studies in linguistic philosophy, philosophy of symbol and myth, but nevertheless the main aim, to provide a philosophical justification of Onomatodoxy, was not achieved. The actual distance between the discourse of classical metaphysics and Eastern Christian discourse was more significant than they supposed it to be, and new elements contained in hesychasm and Palamism could not be brought

into philosophy as mere complements to the basis of the metaphysics of All-Unity (nor could they justify Onomatodoxy). As the contemporary analysis shows, “The neoplatonist relationship between energy and essence accepted implicitly by Onomatodoxy and rather explicitly by its philosophical apologies does not coincide with the relationship, which corresponds to hesychast practice and Orthodox theology of Divine energies”⁷.

Thus the real turn of Russian and Orthodox thought to the Eastern Christian discourse in its entirety came later and followed a different course. It was performed already in the emigration by the next generation of Russian religious thinkers who left out the metaphysics of All-Unity and also metaphysics as such and turned to direct and profound studies of Orthodox spiritual tradition, above all, of theology of Divine energies, which was then very little studied and even little known. This new course formed up in the mid-20th c. in works of Vladimir Lossky, Georgy Florovsky, John Meyendorff e.a. meant the return to genuine origins of Orthodox spirituality and resulted in the emergence of a whole new trend of Orthodox thought. Quickly developing, this trend attracted scholars from all Orthodox countries and became widely known as neo-palamism and neo-patristics. It was basically a theological trend, and one can say that in the field of theology it achieved a fairly comprehensive integration of Eastern Christian discourse into modern Orthodox thought. Today it is still active and creative, elaborating chiefly such subjects as theology of energy and theology of personality and including a number of eminent Orthodox theologians, like, for example, Metropolitans John Zezioulas (Greece) and Amphilochy Radovich (Serbia).

In the field of philosophy the situation is different, however. Notwithstanding the fall of the Communist regime, the tradition of Russian religious philosophy did not come back to creative development. In fact, this philosophy obtains lots of attention in postcommunist Russia and piles of texts on its subjects are produced each year; but all this work is predominantly of historic character. The heritage of great Russian thinkers of Silver Age is studied in the most detailed way, but not complemented with new philosophical advancements. But it should be noted here that such absence of creative movement, of new promising ideas and trends is now characteristic also of general situation in philosophy. After the repudiation of classical metaphysics and after the big splash of destructive or deconstructive activity of postmodernist thought, there is now a kind of a break or an interval in philosophical process. A new situation or configuration has now formed up in all the field of the humanities. Humanistic discourses and borders between them are in a process of big changes, and these changes inevitably influence the tasks and prospects of philosophy.

In particular, we have now a new situation also in the old problem of the relationship between the Eastern Christian discourse and Western thought. The going-out of classical metaphysics removed some old barriers in this relationship. Now European philosophy puts to the forefront the search for new principles of philosophical discourse and new vision of anthropological reality, which could replace classical personology and subjectology. Eastern Christian discourse could provide a valuable contribution to both these fields. Hesychast anthropology develops discourse of energy, which describes the human person as a changing

⁷ Sergey S.Horujy. Onomatodoxy and culture of the Silver Age: the phenomenon of the Moscow School of Christian Neoplatonism // Id. Essays in the Russian Spiritual Tradition. Moscow, 2005. P.296.

configuration of energies and avoids the concept of the essence of man; and such discourse could perhaps provide a sound alternative to essentialist discourse of classical metaphysics.

As for the problems of subject and personality, the positions of Eastern Christian discourse represent a fresh and independent approach to them. *Who comes after the Subject?* – this question was chosen for the title of an important collective work published by a big group of prominent Western thinkers in 1991. One looks for new modes of subjectivity instead of the Cartesian subject and its clones in various humanistic discourses. But Eastern Christian discourse has its own conceptual framework for these problems based on patristic conception of personality as Divine Person, *hypostasis*. This conception implies that the man acquires the personal mode of being actualizing his relation to God and participating in the Divine being; in other terms, unlocking himself towards God. Seeing in such unlocking a certain paradigm of the constitution of human person, synergic anthropology developed in my works generalizes this paradigm and obtains with its help a comprehensive description of types of the human constitution. This nonclassical and pluralistic personology is close in many aspects to the “hermeneutic of the subject” developed by Michel Foucault in his theory of practices of the Self⁸.

Thus ideas and concepts originating in the Eastern Christian discourse do really contribute to the modern search for new nonclassical foundations of philosophical and anthropological thought. Of course, the role of the Eastern Christian discourse in contemporary philosophical process depends, among other factors, upon the fact that this discourse belongs to the field of Christian that is religious thought, while European philosophy is predominantly secular. However, the coming of the postsecularism brings growing chances for dialogue and collaboration between religious and secular consciousness. And surely, the philosophical potential of the ancient Orthodox spiritual tradition is not yet exhausted by far.

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⁸ The comparative analysis of two modern approaches to the anthropological and personological problem, the theory of practices of the Self by Foucault and synergic anthropology, is presented in my forthcoming book, “Practices of the Self and spiritual practices: Michel Foucault and Eastern Christian discourse”. Fordham University Press (in print).