

## HESYCHAST FORMATION OF THEOLOGY AND ITS MODERN PROSPECTS

It is well-known that the ascetical tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, the Hesychasm, has developed its own specific conception of theology which was formed up as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> c., at the first stages of its history. According to this conception, theology deserves really this name only if it is a purely experiential discourse which renders directly what has been experienced personally by its author. As for the necessary experience of “divine things”, it is the kind of experience that is achieved at the higher stages of ascetical practice.

The roots of this conception are not in the ascetics, but the patristics, however. The theology of Kappadocian fathers as well as all their vision included strong ascetical component and accepted the idea that the knowledge of God needs some ascetical preconditions. This idea was expressed most clearly by st. Gregory the Theologian. He wrote that one who devotes himself to theology must follow the ascetical way of life going through the three stages, purification – contemplation – theology (*katharsis – theoria – theologia*). But very soon his disciple Evagrius Ponticus brings the idea to the field of hesychast ascesis, and it takes here more central place than in the patristic thought. Evagrius becomes the first of the hesychast ascetics who organizes the hesychast practice into a full-fledged system, and this system shows clearly the influence of st. Gregory. The ascetical way of spiritual ascension is divided by Evagrius into two big parts, *Praxis* and *Theoria*, or Activity and Contemplation, which correspond obviously to the Purification and Contemplation in st. Gregory (repentance and the struggle with passions which are the main contents of the *Praxis* can be considered as the purification, in a large sense). Let us note also that the concept of contemplation is closely related to other spiritual traditions as well as philosophy, and it has in these areas a different sense; for this reason, in the hesychast literature one prefers often to use the Greek calque, *theoria*. The going through both *Praxis* and *Theoria* is considered as the necessary condition for theologizing. *Theoria*, the higher stage of the practice, corresponds to the vision of God, and Evagrius states: “One who did not see God cannot theologize” (Gnostic Chapters). In the famous treatise “On Prayer” he makes another statement which has become one of the most popular hesychast aphorisms: “If you are a theologian, you pray in a proper way; and if you pray in a proper way, you are a theologian” (Ch. 61). Thus the foundations of the hesychast conception of theology are laid up.

Later, this conception was elaborated in sufficient detail. As the hesychasts see it, the hesychast who reaches the *Theoria* becomes open and transparent for God’s grace or Divine Energies, and in Divine Energies, in the Holy Spirit he enters into communion with Christ. Some of those who achieved and experienced such communion with God are capable to keep their experience and describe it, tell it to others. This explains, in particular, why many hesychast treatises have the name “Practical and Theological Chapters”: in these treatises the account of the experience of *Praxis* drifts successively to the account of the experience of *Theoria* and communion with God, which is exactly theology, by the hesychast view. The experiential conception of theology is not a rare subject in hesychast literature. After Evagrius, we find it in Diadochos of Photiki, the “Ladder of Paradise”, Maximus the Confessor and so on. In st. Maximus and st. John Climacus the theme is given a new turn: discussions on God which are void of experiential ground are called the “theology of daemons” by these Fathers. E.g., in the letter to the monk Marinus st. Maximus writes as follows: “Knowledge of those who pride themselves on it but don’t do practice is the theology of daemons”<sup>1</sup>. The influence of this conception can be seen also in the fact that not just the hesychast but general Orthodox consciousness gave to st. Symeon the name of the New Theologian: in the most evident way, all his theologizing is nothing but the direct account of his personal experience. In the discourse of Palamas theology is virtually identified with *Theoria*. Later

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<sup>1</sup> Преп. Максим Исповедник. Письма. СПб., 2008. С.212.

on, with the help of “Philokalia” the conception in question made its way into the hesychasm of the last two centuries. Quite recently it was firmly stated anew by higoumenos Sophrony (Sakharov). Among his many sayings on this subject, we find, for example, the following: “Theology is not inventions of human mind or results of critical study but the account of the being into which the person was introduced by the action of the Holy Spirit”<sup>2</sup>.

It must be stressed that this position of the ascetic tradition is in no way restricted to bare declarations on the required nature of theology. This position is fully constructive: in the big corpus of hesychast texts there is a rich collection of works on theological subjects, and, in particular, many texts which are called “theological” directly in their titles (for example, the above-mentioned “Theological Chapters” by various authors such as Maximus the Confessor, John of Karpathos, etc.). This collection constitutes a substantial pool of “hesychast theology” and this theology presents itself here as an independent and original theological formation.

As said above, the principal distinction of this formation is its strictly experiential nature. This distinction does not mean, however, that hesychast theology is purely empiric discourse restricted to plain description of experiential data. Even if this theology wanted it, it could not be like this because the experience to be accounted is here most specific: it is inner experience, spiritual experience, mystical experience (on the higher steps of the Hesychast Ladder) and its expression raises difficult problems. Even at its earliest period, the time of the Desert Fathers, the hesychast discourse (presented mainly in the “Apophthegmata Patrum”) is not at all naïve empiric discourse. What looks as simplistic stories about everyday life of anachoretēs is really proverbs, each of which using just most precise and laconic means renders a certain message or “portion of meaning” related to ascetic works. In the period of the mature late-byzantine hesychasm, ascetic discourse includes considerable elements of reflection and analysis. Hesychasm elaborates the complete system of its rules or the “Organon”, in the classical Aristotelian sense, which includes its own methodology and hermeneutics as well as the apparatus of the organization and checking-up of ascetic experience. Hesychasm has developed a vast set of procedures which test rigorously the genuine nature of all the phenomena emerging in the course of ascetic practice. Some of these procedures carry out the testing of the experience on the basis of the Scripture and Tradition.

Building up the Organon of its experience, hesychast theology forms up at the same time the system of its discursive connections. On the one hand, it becomes integrated into the sphere of the Church teaching and rooted in the Scripture and patristic tradition. As we could see, it had the connection with the Greek patristics from the very beginning and the deacon ordination of Evagrius by st. Gregory the Theologian can be considered as symbolic expression of this connection. The connection was two-sided since Orthodox Church Fathers, from st. Basil the Great to Maximus the Confessor and Palamas, were, as a rule, experienced ascetics who stated firmly that personal experience of prayer and ascesis is a necessary precondition and deep-lying nourishing ground of theologizing. The ties of hesychast ascesis and patristic theology are still more strengthened due to the presence of a special link between these two spheres: the deification, *theosis*, is at the same time a subject of theology and the final state or *telos* to which hesychast practice directs itself. Because of its double nature, the *theosis* serves as a common point or *topos* in which ascesis and patristics meet and join together. The close organic tie of the two spheres may be characterized as a kind of their synthesis in which the joined patristic-ascetic discourse is formed-up. Such a discourse is an important typological feature of the Orthodox school of thought.

On the other hand, the fact that hesychast experience in its Organon is thoroughly processed by reflection creates the common ground of hesychast theology and philosophy, and most of all, phenomenology. It is easy to see that their attitude to experience and epistemological positions share many common features. Both hesychasm and Husserlian phenomenology state their fidelity to experience and exclusive concentration on the description of experience. At the same time, they both do not stand on the position of empiricism, but carry out profound reflection of the experience considered; they carefully structure and organize it building up special formations of consciousness

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<sup>2</sup> Иеромонах Софроний. Старец Силуан. М., 1991. С.153.

(structures of intentionality and noesis in phenomenology and configurations corresponding to the steps of the Ladder of the ascension in hesychasm). Their similarity goes very far as I have shown in the book “Phenomenology of Ascesis” (Moscow, 1998). Building up the steps of the Ladder, hesychast consciousness performs the restriction of its horizon by the world of the experience of the ascetic tradition; it places itself into the perspective of this world and cuts off or “puts into brackets” all the volitions and phenomena not belonging to this World of the Tradition. It means evidently that *a certain analogue of phenomenological reduction is carried out in hesychast practice.*

On various stages of the hesychast ascension we discover further common elements with phenomenology. Let us point out now only the most important of them, nearly complete coincidence of intentionality and hesychast category of sobriety or watchfulness (*nepsis*). In the middle part of the Ladder a specific structure of ascetic consciousness is formed up which serves as the key giving unimpeded character to the ascension by the steps. With the formation of this key the ascetic enters the higher part of the Ladder approaching the *telos* of the practice. The structure in question is a tight and firm joining of two activities, attention or sobriety and prayer. The prayer (hesychast incessant prayer) is a leading component; it is the prayer that develops and concentrates in itself the ascending force. However, the role of the attention (sobriety) is crucially important too. Only the attention can secure necessary conditions for the incessant prayer: concentrating inner vision on the process of prayer, hesychast attention or watchfulness carefully guards this process, driving immediately away all the intrusions from outside and cutting off all the alien and distracting thoughts. This is a very sophisticated and complicated mission and so the sobriety obtains a special status in hesychasm: it is not so much a single activity of consciousness as a state or modus of the latter which includes whole set of activities (but the term “activity” is not fully adequate here as we shall see). Hesychast “consciousness in the modus of sobriety” includes a rich collection of predicates: attention (subdivided into many kinds, the attention of the mind and that of the heart, the attention to oneself, etc.), memory (also subdivided into the memory of God, memory of death, memory of one’s own sins, etc.), self-observation, discernment or discrimination (*diacrisis*), guard over the mind and, separately, guard over the heart, vigilance, watchfulness, “staying-inside” (a special kind of introspection, the term of st. Theophanes the Recluse), silence of the heart (*hesychia*), purity of the heart. In this vast set a generative core can be singled out which secures the main function of the modus of sobriety: to focus the consciousness precisely on a certain configuration of man’s energies which corresponds to incessant prayer, and then preserve identically and reproduce this configuration. The parallel sobriety – intentionality is now completely evident. Intentionality is also not a single property but a certain modus of consciousness which includes, according to Husserl, a vast set of intentional predicates: *Abzielen, Erfassen, Aufmerksamkeit, Achtsamkeit*, etc. It is worth adding that besides other common features, sobriety and intentionality share such specific property as the overcoming of the Aristotelian opposition of activity and passivity; they both represent the watchful readiness to action, alertness and concentration of consciousness directed to and focused on a definite object. However, in hesychast practice this “intentional object” is such that phenomenology would never choose it: hesychast consciousness performs the intention on incessant prayer. The difference from phenomenology consists not only in the religious and mystical nature of the object. The set of energies of a praying man is a mobile, ever-changing configuration of energies; moreover, it includes not only intellectual but also emotional and somatic energies, and such intentional object is incomparably more complicated than any objects ever studied by phenomenology. Here phenomenological techniques are transferred to the field of extreme anthropological experience.

Thus notwithstanding that hesychast consciousness and phenomenological consciousness are functioning in different experiential horizons, due to common principles of the primacy of experience and thorough elaboration of experience as well as common interest in techniques of control and fixation of the contents of consciousness, they have a number of common transcendental structures. As for hesychast theology, its discourse possesses a certain structural connection and affinity to phenomenology.

Another, even more important, discursive and conceptual connection of hesychast theology is directly evident. Developing in the context of ascetic, *ergo*, anthropological practice, this theology has necessarily close connection with anthropology. When theological problems and concepts are integrated into such context they become unavoidably mediated by anthropological experience; and it means that hesychast theology is inwardly anthropologized theology which is connected with anthropological discourse already in its structure and conceptual apparatus.

However, the theme “theology and anthropology” has today a very concentrated history, and in the light of this history the trend of the anthropologization of theology is often confronted in Orthodoxy with doubts and questions. They are rooted in the fact that this trend was usually developed most actively in Protestantism. Here it represents the mainstream of theology but its theological positions diverge, as a rule, with the Orthodox positions. The nature of the divergences is quite simple: in the protestant strategies of the anthropologization the Orthodox consciousness sees usually the *reduction of theology*, i.e. the tendency to reduce the role of the Revelation and the Church dogmas and to minimize or cut-off completely all aspects of theology connected with mystical life of the Ecclesiastic Body and each Christian. Such view has its reasons. It can hardly be denied that all the line of the protestant anthropologization of theology was profoundly influenced by ideas of Feuerbach. Feuerbach’s philosophy stimulated the consolidation of many variegated anthropologizing trends in Protestantism and, to some extent, it has provided the matrix of the protestant type of the anthropologization: the matrix, the core of which is the famous Feuerbach thesis “all the mystery and the genuine sense of theology is anthropology”. Of course, protestant theories loyal to the basic Christian doctrine did not perform the complete “Feuerbachian anthropologization” since the latter amounted not so much to the reduction as the rejection of this doctrine. However, the general reductionist vector, to which not just Feuerbach but also the schools of historical hyper-criticism, Schleiermacher and many others have contributed, kept always considerable force and influence. Traces of the reduction can easily be found in all protestant theories following the line of the anthropologization. It is true, in particular, for the most popular of such theories, existential theology by Rudolf Bultmann since its basic principle of demythologization subjects openly to reduction many contents of both conciliary and ascetic Christian experience.

Nevertheless Orthodox thought does not reject the anthropologization as a whole. Fr John Meyendorff wrote as follows: “Now it is commonplace to say that theology must become anthropology nowadays. An Orthodox theologian can and even must enter the dialogue on such a base, but under the condition that the *open* view of man should be accepted from the start”<sup>3</sup>. This statement is directly related to our subject. Fr John was a prominent scholar of Byzantine theology and hesychasm, and it is safe to say that the “open view of man” in his words refers to the Orthodox view which sees the nature of man as not closed in itself but making itself open towards God in the ascension to *theosis*. Such vision of human nature was developed theoretically in patristics and put to practice in Orthodox ascesis, the hesychasm. Thus it follows from Meyendorff’s statement that hesychast theology characterized by us as “inwardly anthropologized” realizes the anthropologization of a different type which does not imply the reduction of dogmatic and mystical dimensions of theology. Indeed, the experience of hesychast practice is the experience of ontological openness: the experience of a human person who unlocks and opens him/herself towards God. Here theology and anthropology achieve a kind of mutual balance, they are turned to each other in such a way that theological discourse is a direct continuation of anthropological discourse and vice versa. Due to this, hesychast theology carries out the strategy of anthropologization which is very different from all protestant strategies and does not imply the reduction of theology.

We can now sum up. In our description “hesychast theology” is outlined as a theological formation, distinctive features of which are the direct basing on hesychast experience, inner

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<sup>3</sup> Прот. Иоанн Мейендорф. Православное богословие в современном мире // Православие в современном мире. Нью-Йорк, 1981. С.175 (курсив автора).

anthropologization not reducing dogmatic and mystical dimensions, and epistemological apparatus kindred to phenomenology. Obviously, it is an unusual set of properties which makes this formation much different from the traditional image of theology as a scholastic discourse drawing the most varied consequences from postulates of Christian doctrine. However, it must be taken into account that this “classical” formation of theology is to some extent similar to classical metaphysics in the type of discourse and nature of concepts, and both classical discourses are now undergoing a long crisis. Theological thought as well as philosophical one is in the intense search of renewal, and in the context of this search the special features of hesychast theology might represent an advantage.

To start with, theology that uses the language of practices and renders the living religious experience is topical now as a type of theology that makes it possible to put off the discourse of abstract categories of the old scholastic theology. In particular, due to the experiential ground and the language of practices a new way is opened for positing the most topical problem of the relation to the Other, i.e. the problem of the attitude of Orthodox theology and consciousness to secular consciousness and consciousness of non-Orthodox confessions or non-Christian religions. Rejection of the abstract categories implies here rejection of ideological discourse which represents the relation to the Other in terms of binary oppositions and polar confrontations. The principle of the primacy of experience brings forth the possibility to go from this discourse to the dialogue of practices each of which proceeds from its own experience and keeps loyalty to its ground, but at the same time builds up its relation to the Other in the practical and experiential, and not ideological perspective.

“Inner anthropologization” of hesychast theology provides also prerequisites of its application to one more topical field of problems, the field of personology. The crisis of the Cartesian conception of the subject and, in a wider context, the crisis of the classical European anthropological model forced European thought to turn to the search of new modi of subjectivity and new paradigm of human constitution. But any spiritual practice including hesychasm, of course, is a *constitutive* anthropological practice since it builds up the structures of human personality and identity. Moreover, the paradigm of human constitution actualized in such practice is surely non-classical because spiritual practices do not use the concept of the essence of man which is the fundament of the classical paradigm. Due to this, the reconstruction of the paradigm of human constitution which corresponds to hesychast practice and is actualized in the ascension over its steps could provide a valuable contribution to the problem of the search for new modi of subjectivity. However, the study of structures of personality and identity constituted in hesychast practice is only at the initial stage so far<sup>4</sup>.

Undoubtedly, hesychasm today, and hesychast theology, in particular, is not just ancient heritage studied by modern science. There are important examples of fruitful development of hesychast theology by contemporary members of the hesychast tradition. In the works by higuemenos Sophrony (Sakharov, 1896-1993) classical subjects of hesychast experience are represented anew in the language of modern intellectual culture, and what is more, a special attention is paid here to the higher stages of the ascesis, the communion with God and the approach to the *theosis*. It is a genuine hesychast theology of the 20th c. rooted in the ground of ascetic experience as firmly as before. One can mention also the works by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) who is present at this conference. In these works we find a special attention to the hesychast *paradigm of the return*. According to this paradigm, after achieving full maturity in ascetic works, a hesychast ascetic returns to the world and society in order to provide them spiritual guidance and enlighten them with the hesychast experience. Realizing this attitude of return, the works by Metropolitan Kallistos turn often to acute problems of secular mind and society including them into the orbit of hesychast theology.

A good example of such hesychast theology of nowadays is provided by his well-known work “Praying with the body: the hesychast method and non-Christian parallels” (1992)<sup>5</sup>. Modern culture

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. С.С.Хоружий. Конституция личности и идентичности в перспективе опыта древних и современных практик себя // Вопросы философии. 2007. №1. С.75-85.

<sup>5</sup> For the Russian translation see: Символ (Париж – Москва), 2007. №52. С.13-50.

shows enormous interest to everything concerning human body and its problems and so, turning to these problems, Metropolitan Kallistos follows clearly the paradigm of return. In old theology the comprehension of human corporeality would take the form of “theology of the body”, one of typical “particular theologies” in the essentialist theological discourse. In this approach, the body and corporeality are singled out as a separate and isolated subject, and then “theology of the body” is constructed in the standard manner by means of collecting and analyzing the pool of all scriptural, dogmatic, patristic and ascetic sources relating to this subject. But in the work we discuss no isolated essentialist “theology of the body” is constructed. Theological discourse of human body arises here as an organic part of inwardly anthropologized theology which describes the actualization of the constitutive relation *Man – God* in a certain set of practices; and it represents phenomenological and analytical description of definite aspects of the experience of these practices.

In my opinion, this example gives us a good demonstration of properties of hesychast theology as well as its fruitfulness in the present-day spiritual and intellectual situation.