
TO THE QUESTION ABOUT MAINTAINING AND INTERPRETING OF DIVINITY IN RUSSIAN ORTHODOX TRADITION

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the concept of divinity and the analysis of some aspects of its content in the Russian Orthodox tradition. The authors examine the milestones of formation and the main ideas of the theological heritage of the early Christian thinkers and outstanding devotees of the Ancient Eastern Church, whose works reveal the ontological destiny of man established in evangelical values, which makes it possible to emphasize the significance of the Orthodox world outlook in spiritual growth.

The purpose of the paper is to study the teachings of Orthodox theologians Athenagoras Afinsky, Clement of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Origen to understand the origin of the term ‘divinity’, its content and interpretation. The authors also prove that the idea of divine Incarnation and Christocentrism becomes a priority in the patristic Orthodox theological tradition in relation to philosophical worldviews and is the basis of spiritual growth.

Keywords: spiritual, culture, Church Fathers, teaching, Church

1. Introduction

Understanding the specifics of various aspects of Russian culture and philosophy contributes to understanding the origin, continuity and development of the phenomenon of divinity in the patristic Christian tradition. The formed tradition subsequently became a spiritual and moral basis for the Orthodox world outlook of the Russian people, which embodied the Christocentric idea in the creation of numerous monuments of culture (the devotional art), in the philosophical worldview and way of life [1-8].

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To understand the phenomenon of ‘divinity’, some important distinctive characteristics of the theologians’ achievements were systematized in tabular form (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of the key characteristics of ‘divinity’ that influenced modern understanding of the phenomenon.

Author	Description
Athenagoras Afinsky	Holy Trinity teaching
Clement of Alexandria	He compares the concepts of faith and reason and affirms their harmony.
Origen	He prioritizes faith and religion over human reason and philosophy, defining intellectual activity as a means by which the interpretation and clarification of guidelines of the Christian religion occurs.
Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa	Formation of Orthodox theology
Maximus the confessor John of Damascus	Arrangement of all the past Church experience and the creation of a complete theological teaching
Symeon the New Theologian	He continued to develop, defend and improve the formed teaching of the Church in terms of opposition to the pressure of the Western Christian world. He revived and became a teacher of mental action – <i>hesychasm</i> , which led to the contemplation of the uncreated Divine Light.
Gregory Palamas	He confirmed the priority of the theological and mystical principle within the framework of the Orthodox worldview. He gave a dogmatic rationale for the practice of mental action and contemplation.
Father George Florovskiy, Saint Ignatius the God-bearer, Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, Origen, Eusebius of Saint Athanasius the Great	The creators of the Orthodox theological tradition They developed the doctrinal teaching of Christianity in the era of Patristics.
Maximus the Confessor Venerable John of Damascus	They arranged all the past Church experience and created a holistic theological teaching.
Gregory of Sinai	He renewed and approved the internal work on Athos, which spread from there to the Ancient Rus.
V.N. Lossky	He presented divinity as the method of knowledge of God connected with Orthodox ascetic practice.

According to historical sources, Athenagoras of Athens was the first to introduce the notion ‘divinity’ into the Christian vocabulary in the second half of the 2nd century. This term denoted the doctrine of Holy Trinity. Divinity is interpreted as mystery of union with God in Christ, performed in the grace-filled life of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Later, the word ‘divinity’, borrowed by Christian authors from the Ancient Greek philosophy acquired broader meaning and was fully adopted into the Christian vocabulary due to the Alexandrian Divine School, including Clement of Alexandria and mainly Origen. Thus, in the philosophical interpretation of Theology, Clement of Alexandria first relates the concepts of faith and reason and affirms their harmony. In his theological system, Origen prioritizes faith and religion over human reason and Philosophy defining intellectual activity as a means by which one can comprehend and clarify the guidelines of the Christian religion.

Among other thought leaders of the Orthodox theological tradition were: Father George Florovsky, Saint Ignatius the God-bearer, Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, Origen, Eusebius of Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Gregory Palamas. In the tradition of the Fathers, the outstanding spiritual ascetics of the 2nd-7th centuries developed in the era of Patristics the doctrinal teaching of Christianity.

The works of the Cappadocian theologians of the 4th century (from the name of the Asia Minor region of Cappadocia), the saints Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa, were essential for the formation Orthodox theology [5-7, 9].

A significant contribution to the formation of the Orthodox worldview was made by Maxim the Confessor and venerable John of Damascus (7th-8th cc.), who, as was commonly believed in theological circles, arranged all the past Church experience and created a holistic theological teaching [4, 5, 7, 10].

In the following period, Orthodox divinity continued to develop in order to protect and improve the religious dogmas that had been formed to oppose to the pressure of the Western Christian world. A prominent role in this process was played by Simeon the New Theologian (the 11th century), one of the most significant Byzantine theologians and hesychasts, and Saint Gregory Palamas (14th century) who again affirmed the priority of the theological-mystical principle within the framework of the Orthodox worldview. It is worth mentioning that Venerable Simeon the New Theologian became a leader and revived mental action (hesychasm) which led to the contemplation of the uncreated Divine Light. Venerable Gregory of Sinai renewed and confirmed inner workings on Athos which spread from there to the limits of Ancient Rus. Saint Gregory Palamas provided dogmatic justification for the practice of mental action and contemplation in the theological doctrine of the uncreated energy of God [11-13]. Regarding God not as an impersonal entity, but as a rationally inconceivable Being, Orthodox Christianity trusts into the spotlight apophatic divinity, thereby emphasizing the need of spiritual communication with God and His uncreated energy.

In V.N. Lossky's works, *apophatic* divinity (from Greek *apophatikos* – negative) is represented as an inseparable part of the Orthodox ascetic practice of getting fuller knowledge of God. This postulate proceeds from the understanding of God as a Being that is transcendental to the created world [14]. Apophatic divinity is one of the two ways of the Orthodox knowledge of God. Being a 'path of denial' of God's unrequited qualities this way of divinity is supplemented 'by affirmations', i.e. *cataphatic* theology in accordance with which the combination of the perfections of the created world is the embodiment of God's perfection. In Saint Gregory Palamas' opinion, the antinomy of cataphatic and apophatic divinity has its real foundation in God. It reveals to the human mind a mysterious difference between the unknowable and unnamed essence of God and His actions that can be understood and described (divine energy).

It is important to highlight that for teachers of the Old Church 'divinity' meant 'the word about God', 'the word from God' or 'the word to God'. The Church Fathers attributed the Holy Scripture only to divinity since it had been literally a word about God and from God. At the same time, the Old Testament was called the Old Divinity, and the New Testament was called the New Divinity.

As Christianity was developed and spread, the term 'divinity' acquired twofold interpretation: firstly, divinity was understood as the word of God about Himself, and also about the world He created. The content of divinity considered in this aspect was identified with Divine Revelation. Besides Holy Scripture, the term 'divinity' was also used to refer to every dogma about the Christian truth (it was sometimes used in this meaning concerning the doctrine of God and worship). Secondly, a widely used meaning of the sought-for concept characterized God-related dogmas of the Church or of some particular scholar-theologian [15].

The concept presented in this research can be properly classified as personal, subjective and meditated evidence of Divine Revelation being fully understood by a certain author. To the 12th century, divinity had developed into a systematic description of all Christian truths about God and divine worship.

2. Modern understanding of the phenomenon of divinity

Nowadays, the Christian tradition, namely the Orthodox one, regards divinity as a systematic doctrine about God based on Sacred Scripture which the Church considers to be Revelation, i.e. God's tale about Himself and the Church's spiritual experience within Holy Tradition. According to Orthodox traditions, a person who has not mystical experience of communicating with God cannot obtain the true knowledge of God. Orthodox divinity is also based on Antic philosophy and has formed a well-balanced system of notions and contemplations during theological debates of the 4-7th centuries.

If we are talking about modern Orthodox divinity, it is a system of various theological disciplines that aim to discover, explain and preserve religious beliefs and Orthodox traditions, as well as to develop elements of this system. Nowadays, divinity is widely understood as a combination of religious sciences divided into

basic, comparative, moral and pastoral divinity, with *Dogmatics* being used in the true sense. When a Christian thinker was called a ‘theologian’ in the Early Christian Church, it was so honorary because there were only three saints in Orthodox Church given this distinguished title, including Saint John the Evangelist, the author of the fourth Gospel that laid the foundation for the doctrine of Holy Trinity and connected Divine Revelation and patristic divinity; Saint Gregory the Theologian who defended the Orthodox doctrine of Holy Trinity during Trinitarian debates of the 4th century and praised Holy Trinity in his poems; Saint Symeon the New Theologian who lived at the turn of the 11th century and praised the union of a person and Holy Trinity in ‘Hymns of Divine Love’ based on his personal experience [1-3; 10; 14, p. 452; 15, p. 358; 16].

3. Features and criteria

Metropolitan Anthony (Blum) of Sourozh, a remarkable theologian and Orthodox philosopher of the 20th century, indicates three basic features to distinguish the Church Father and the so-called ‘common theologians’, namely “holiness, the rightness of doctrines and ancienctry” [17]. These criteria work as specific ‘markers’ of the right divine destination and have been adopted from traditional Catholic patristics. Speaking about the first feature (*holiness*) we should notice that holiness is always considered to be an inseparable part of a real theologian. The thing is, Orthodox divinity in the patristic tradition has never been regarded as a domain of theoretical discourse and a ‘secluded’, rational science beyond a real spiritual and creative life. At the same time, Metropolitan Anthony (Blum) highlights that “personal holiness does not necessarily guarantee that some author has and expresses perfect divine ideas” [17].

In the Church’s history there were situations when canonized authors of divine works expressed an opinion that differed from canonical dogmatics. Thus, the Bishops’ Council of 2000 dedicated to the canonization of many Russian new martyrs and confessors stressed out that the canonization itself did not make their statements or written works a part of *patristic divinity*. Regarding the *rightness of doctrines* (the second criterion of patristic canonicity), it is worth mentioning that the Church Fathers have been ‘expressers of the Church Tradition’ and their works should be perfect examples of expressing Orthodox faith. In this case, while reading patristic works, one should distinguish the ideas expressed on behalf of the Church and personal divine opinions and subjective declarations called *theologumens*. Following the existing rules, an opinion of one Church Father who has not been rejected or convicted by the Church mind falls into the acceptable borders, but cannot be classified as obligatory for Orthodox believers. Concerning the last criterion of patristic divinity (*ancientry*), there is an authoritative opinion of Protopresbyter John Meyendorff, an Orthodox philosopher and theologian, who said that this feature was doubtful and unconvincing [18]. This position can be proved by the fact that an Orthodox Christian takes both Irenaeus of Lyons who lived in the 2nd century and Saint Theophan the Recluse, a remarkable theologian of the 19th century, as the Church

Fathers. Nevertheless, we should not see in absolute terms judgments and statements of the above mentioned thinkers regarding Orthodox divinity.

4. The meanings of the teachings of the Holy Fathers for a modern understanding of the phenomenon of ‘theology’

We should highlight some great pioneers and founders of Orthodox theology, because it was their selfless work and inspired ideas that the great tree of theological thought of whole generations of ascetic ascetics was ‘nourished’ with and cultivated for the following centuries. We can add to this undeniable fact that the prevailing theological doctrine preserved the inviolability of the fundamental dogmas that were later subjected to creative thinking by a brilliant assemblage of Russian religious philosophers, representatives of Russian classical literature. Who were the Fathers of the Church and what was their main merit? Initially, the Orthodox faith was defined as apostolic and paternal faith. According to Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, who appealed to the ‘original Tradition’, “the Christian faith was the faith of the Universal Church, which the Lord transmitted, the apostles preached, the Fathers preserved” [19]. In accordance with this logic, the patristic heritage can be defined as a direct continuation of the teachings of Christ and the apostles, and the writings of the Fathers can be characterized as an integral part of Orthodox Tradition.

It is a common belief in the Orthodox sphere that Holy Fathers are theologians of the past, but the word ‘past’ can have various definitions. It is widely accepted and proved that the epoch of patristics ended in the 8th century. It is suggested by the fact that John of Damascus, a remarkable Christian philosopher and theologian, wrote ‘An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith’ where he summarized theological debates going on for several centuries. There are different opinions, though, supported by the gap between the first and second Rome, i.e. the Constantinople of the 11th century and the Constantinople in the middle of the 15th century (1453) when it was destroyed together with the powerful Byzantine Empire. Within the framework of these arguments, the thought expressed by Georges Florovsky, an Orthodox philosopher, that “the Church has no lesser authority than previously since the Holy Spirit is as alive as in previous years” and “the age of Holy Fathers” cannot belong to some exact time is perfectly justified [20]. The same opinion is expressed by theologian Kallistos of Diokleia (Ware) who believes that an Orthodox Christian should not only know and cite Holy Fathers, but also ‘enter into their spirit’ and acquire a ‘Patristic mind’ – “Indeed, it is dangerous to look on ‘the Fathers’ as a closed cycle of writings belonging wholly to the past, for might not our own age produce a new Basil or Athanasius? To say that there can be no more Fathers is to suggest that the Holy Spirit has deserted the Church.” [21] Opposite to the Catholic concept about the past as a necessary feature of the Church Fathers, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh talks about “*timely* Patristic divinity in any epoch” [17, p. 18]. Indeed, we sometimes are amazed by the timelessness and contemporaneousness of moral teachings of Patristic theologians from the past

despite their archaic and hard-to-understand linguistic forms. Patristic divinity is characterized by the fact that the Church Fathers did not have the narrow-mindedness, 'blinkered vision' and bigotry typical of modern authors who acted like 'real' theologians and keepers of spiritual and ascetical culture.

We cannot but agree with Metropolitan Anthony (Blum) who states that such Orthodox philosophers and theologians as Saint Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Gregory Palamas and many others were well-educated and highly intelligent people devoted to religious and classic sciences. They were willing to bring up and discuss burning issues in order to find answers in creative, open and productive disputes.

Therefore, the Church Fathers were theologians who had personal holiness, were loyal to traditions of the Orthodoxy and tried communicating with their apprentices and opponents in layman's terms. While forming their own opinion and comparing it with beliefs of the Church, theologians did not avoid the most controversial and complicated issues because they strived to find the truth and reach spiritual perfection.

5. Conclusions

The basis of the Orthodox theological tradition is the ideas, writings and spiritual ascetic experience of the Eastern Church Fathers, outstanding spiritual ascetics of the 2nd-8th centuries, who developed the dogmatic teaching of Christianity. With regard to the theoretical and methodological approach to understanding the content of modern Orthodox theology, it is a system of various theological disciplines that help to substantiate, interpret, and defend the system of Orthodox dogma and the development of various elements of this system.

As one of the dominant features of the Orthodox patristic tradition, it should be pointed out that Theology has never been interpreted as part of rational and theoretical knowledge distanced from the real, practical spiritual life. Understanding the postulate 'about the relevance of patristic theology in any era', one can argue that Theology in the Russian Orthodox tradition is a holistic and dynamic creative process that preserves the continuity of the patristic heritage, defined as a direct continuation of the teachings of Christ and the apostles. The main approach, combining different interpretations of the phenomenon of theology, presented above and reflecting the conceptual Christ-centric idea of man's spiritual development, can rightfully be defined as 'Life in Christ' – a blessed participation in the God-man Jesus Christ by the Lord and Saviour.

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