RELIGIOUS ANTHROPOLOGY OF EASTERN (GREEK-BYZANTINE) PATRISTICS

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to reviewing the understanding of an individual found in the works of the Eastern Patristics' representatives at the times of Trinity and Christology disputes occurring in the Byzantine Empire from the 4th till 7th century. Also presented are the ideas of some of the earlier Church Fathers who, during the period of the apologetics of Christianity, laid the foundations of the early Medieval Christian anthropology. The author analyses the provisions of the Greek-Byzantine thinkers on the purpose of Man in his personal relationship with God, shows the Patristics' justification of the Old Testament understanding of an individual in his 'image' and 'likeness' of God. Special attention is paid to the study of the teachings of the Eastern Church Fathers revealing the contradictory essence of each individual, consisting of the confrontation of the soul (spirit) and body. The principle of antinomianism is derived as the main method of comprehension of human nature in relation to the Creator. The ideas of 'deification' and 'salvation' are designed as basic categories, outlining the cherished goal and the righteous path for a person who directs his thoughts to self-improvement, self-knowledge and comprehension of God, and the achievement of spiritual unity with Him. The article is based on the analysis of primary sources – texts of the Church Fathers of Greek-Byzantine Christianity.

Keywords: Philosophy, Theology, Eastern Christianity, God-likeness, Philosophy of Religion

1. Introduction - from ancient philosophical tradition to the Christian theocentrism and anthropology

Byzantine's theology and philosophy in the era of early Christianity are primarily the theory-rich works of the Eastern (Greek-Byzantine) Church Fathers, created in the period from the 4th to the 8th centuries and dedicated to the Christian Orthodox problematics. Eastern Patristics is a holistic religious, philosophical and cultural phenomenon which includes not only theological issues but also a variety of anthropological, axiological, epistemological ideas and concepts.

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The formation of Byzantine culture and philosophy was happening in parallel with the development of the Christian Weltanschauung, which, in turn, was being established in the debate with the philosophical, ethical, scientific and aesthetic views of the ancient world. The religious way of thinking was starting to dominate in all sphere of the Byzantine public consciousness with Christianity being adopted as the state religion in the Empire. Under these conditions, the Eastern Christian theology served as a link of all the spheres of the medieval culture. Philosophy, culture and religion were interconnected by a single thread of the Greek-Byzantine Christian world.

Theological and philosophical synthesis in the area of the early Byzantine culture was carried out in the period of *Trinity* (4th century) and *Christology* (5th – 7th centuries) disputes that begot the basic Christian dogmas concerning the *Holy Trinity*, *Incarnation* and *God-man*. The dogmatic conditionality of these centuries-old theological discussions greatly influenced the development of the Byzantine's spiritual life. At that stage Christianity introduced a humanistic orientation, allowing the European civilization to make a leap, transforming ancient pagan institutions and realigning ethical concept towards spirituality and universal sense.

Under the forming Byzantine medieval culture, the Christian theocentric model of the world took shape, expressed as a special, sign-oriented and semantic religious system. With that *theocentric* grounds of Christianity were closely associated the religious *anthropological* teaching, the origins of which are rather to be found in Eastern Patristics than in the Western one. The Eastern Church Fathers, while long developing the Incarnation dogma, elaborated a profound doctrine of man, his thoughts and life, correlating with God.

Thus, the theocentrism of the Byzantine theology correlated with the anthropology of Eastern Christianity's religious system. The religious-anthropological doctrine was at the cutting edge of Greek-Byzantine Patristics and Eastern Christianity as a whole. In our opinion, the major spheres of the early Byzantine culture (including Philosophy, Aesthetics, Art, and Historiography) were somewhat incomplete lacking the development of a human problem, dealing with his essence and purpose. Moreover, the Church Fathers' diversity of anthropological and epistemological views concerning the 'human – God' dichotomy strengthened Theology itself, giving it the status of an integral and rational system.

Despite the fact that the ideological prerequisites of Eastern Christian anthropology could be found in Ancient Greek philosophy and Judaism, Eastern Patristics established its own original tradition of a human consideration. With the advent of Christianity, ancient cosmocentrism gave way to early medieval theocentrism, in which the doctrine of an individual was formed on the basis of biblical standing of the creation of man in the *image and likeness* of God. In the then-forming Christian anthropology, the Old Testament type of man, reviewed as the *apex of creation,* still prevailed.

Whilst discussing the Christological problematics, the Church Fathers designed the concept of a person, striving to achieve the absolute value and purpose of life – *God-likeness* and *deification*. However, the Fathers established the fundamental idea that a person can not only achieve this absolute value but also lose it. In this regard, the actions and thoughts of an individual should correlate with the prospect of the ultimate salvation and absolute death. An individual thus finds himself at the precipice of a split life as if drawn in two opposite directions: to the vile, mundane, evil *and* to the spiritual, sublime, divine. The person is split by his contradictory position in the world.

Therefore, *antinomianism*, which claimed the contradictory nature of man, is the most important, essential principle of the anthropological concept of Eastern Patristics. For another thing, it generally describes the religious culture of the early medieval Byzantine Empire.

Proceeding from the premise of the complete domination of spirit over matter, Greek-Byzantine Patristics sought to create an image of a *spiritual human*, aspiring to the spiritualization of both body and soul in his moral self-improvement. The Christian ideal of a spiritualized human, based on the principles of deification, and God-likeness was a new direction in culture, discovered by the Patristics literature.

Thus, Christian anthropology saw a comprehensive syncretism of Ancient Hebrew ideas and European philosophical and historical traditions utilizing the Greek-Roman culture. This synthesis directed an individual at comprehension of his inner, spiritual world in the process of his ascendance to God.

2. Man as the image and likeness of God in the concepts of Eastern Church Fathers

By putting human in the centre of the Universe, Christian tradition declared him as the sole creature with the spirit and flesh, therefore, possessing and ability to unite the earthly and heavenly worlds. Such an interpretation followed from the Old Testament statement of Man created in the *image and likeness of God*: "And God said, let Us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1.26). The Old Testament thesis served as a backbone for the Christian culture's *anthropocentrism*, because only created in the *image and likeness of God* a person could be considered not only as the centre and *acme* of the Universe but also as an acting subject on the path of deification in order to achieve spiritual unity with the Creator. The main purpose of Eastern Patristics was, in fact, the justification of the said Old Testament takes.

The traditional for Eastern Patristics division between *image* and *likeness* started with the apologetics of the $1^{st} - 2^{nd}$ centuries, substantiated by Irenaeus (2nd century) in his debate with Gnostics. For him, *image* is the lowest, and *likeness* is the highest level of God-being. The image is something originally inherent to man since the very age of creation, something natural, closely connected to the human essence. The image is the unity of body and soul, where the former is the material expression of the divine spirituality. The image lacks

Spirit, therefore lacking the likeness. Man remains potentially imperfect till the Holy Spirit enters the carnal body.

Likeness, according to Irenaeus, animates an individual and cannot be connected with the body. The likeness is the spiritual and mental state of a person. The first man (Adam) before the fall possessed both image and likeness. Likeness consisted of a special supernatural closeness to God, His immortality and grace. With the fall of man, humanity lost its likeness but with the Christ incarnated (Logos) an individual was able to get closer to God (*likeness*) through good deeds and leading the virtuous life. Man himself is responsible for restoring likeness and achieving the foretype, although likeness can also be given as the God's grace as a reward for a righteous life. According to Irenaeus, the likeness is the ideal of the spiritual and, above all, moral perfection of an individual.

Clement of Alexandria develops further Irenaeus' ideas. Saint Clement believes that free will is an actual God's image in a person, with reason and conscience being the images of Logos. At once he considered likeness as a special dynamic process. The likeness is both the ultimate goal, ideal of a Christian's aspirations, leading to deification, and the infinite process of implementing this goal for full becoming like God is unattainable. The likeness is an endless path to perfection. Only Christ possessed the 'image and likeness', human could and should only strive for 'likeness' to God. Clement of Alexandria doesn't speak about specific ways of achieving the state of likeness – this would be done later in the works of the ascetic Church Fathers – but highlights the general principles of this path, relating to the religious and moral self-improvement of man.

Saint John of Damascus, summarizing the Eastern Christian providential conception, interprets the Old Testament mystery of God-likeness the following way: "For the phrase 'after His image' clearly refers to the side of his nature which consists of mind and free will, whereas 'after His likeness' means likeness in virtue so far as that is possible" [John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book II, Chapter XII: *Concerning Man*, http://www.orthodox.net/fathers/exactidx.html]. The *image of God* notion as an expression of human wisdom means an elevation of man, his dominance over the entire world, while the *God-likeness* concept can be discovered as a potential trend of moral self-improvement.

Patristics records the contradiction, the abyss between man and God. Man doesn't equal God; however, there is an inherent *urge* for God in every individual, a desire to overcome the abyss. To settle this contradiction, the concepts of *image* and *likeness* are introduced. Eastern as well as Western Church Fathers came to the same conclusion that Man created in the image and after the likeness of God asserts the harmony between a human being and God.

However, the concept of *God-likeness* also recorded the Church Fathers' dual assessment of the essence of human. On the one hand, it was expressed in the understanding of Man as a 'great animal', a 'marvellous' creature (Saint John Chrysostom), a 'king' of the created world (Saint Gregory of Nyssa); and

on the other, it didn't actually mean the complete similarity and equality of an individual with the Creator. In Byzantine Patristics a person was conceived as the intersection of contradictory relations between God and the world, unfolding in the temporal historical process. As a creation of God, an individual resists uncreated God, His absolute transcendence. But if the body is transient and finite, the soul is a *sigh* of the Holy Spirit, being thus withdrawn from the mundane world. An individual, comparable in his spirituality with God, acquires thus the absolute uncreated being.

According to Gregory of Nyssa, the duality of human nature is consciously 'envisaged' by the Creator: the foretype of Man supposes duality by mixing the divine and the mundane for an individual to 'experience' God through the Divine nature and the earthly goods through the connatural feelings. Through an individual the whole world becomes Eucharistic: 'Light' is now visible, 'Glory' is witnessed, and everything Divine doesn't remain idle. Saint Gregory wrote: "…the human nature also, as it was made to rule the rest, was, by its likeness to the King of all, made as it were a living image, partaking with the archetype both in rank and in name" [1].

The antinomianism of the consideration of Man in the patristic texts with anthropological ideas quite naturally led to a distinctive desire to elevate an individual over the rest of the world with a simultaneously pronounced tendency to belittle people, exposing their weaknesses and vices. Early Christianity calls Man *God by grace* (e.g. Athanasius of Alexandria and the Cappadocian Fathers), thus signifying the human desire to acquire the highest absolute values and moral norms in a purely personal way through individual searches and endless spiritual ascent. At the same time, a human being cannot be called an absolutely perfect phenomenon.

Since the Eastern Orthodox cultural tradition saw an individual as the highest and the most perfect creature, all attention was focused on an explication of the meaning and purpose of his existence. A person in Christianity is a servant of God, yet this is not humiliating but valorising instead. This idea will find its resumption in the works of the Russian religious philosophers of the late 19th – early 20th centuries, in particular, in Nikolai Berdyaev's Christian anthropology [2]. However, creationism forced to explain the origin of man *ex nihilo* (from ashes and dust). In relations with other people, Christianity makes people even: "Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free" (Colossians 3.11). Only the Creator is the Lord above humans, guiding them to acquire absolute moral qualities and higher spiritual values. By spiritualizing body, one may overcome the gap with God, realize God's design, and achieve the image and likeness with God.

3. The contradictory nature of man and the possibility of its overcoming on the path to God

Creating a new, religious conception of Man the Byzantine thinkers sought to reconcile the two opposites in a holistic person – i.e. divine, spiritual

and human, sensual natures, soul and body. The Cappadocian theologian Saint Gregory of Nyssa contemplated solving the problem of likening incorporeal to corporeal, eternal to temporary, passionate and decaying to dispassionate and imperishable, accustomed to evil and sin to uninvolved in evil. Saint Gregory, referring to the well-known passage in the Scripture, notes that God had once created every person conciliar, with triunity inherent to each and every individual and related to the Divine. A person in this sense is an Individual, defining own nature, likening it to the Divine foretype [1, p. 54, 56]. Therefore, the presence of the divine features in an individual designates the human nature in its integrity.

The first Man (Adam) was the only personality. He had to achieve the complete harmony with God but because of self-determination enter into conflict with the Maker. In this regard, patristics states an unconventional comprehension of the phenomenon of freedom. Freedom is a reflection of the created human nature. The *image* bears the same traits as the foretype. The first human was not only rewarded with 'the image and likeness' but, unlike other living beings, he was granted the possibility to destroy own God-likeness thus manifesting the freedom of choice. Irenaeus wrote: "But because man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God" [3].

Precisely because people were given the freedom of choice, they could disobey. By creating the first Man, God creates beings who just like Him, can decide and choose. Yet people are able to make decisions against the Creator. However, God still brings to life an individual being, able to give Him up. God takes 'risks', allowing the existence of something independent since the image of the Creator must include freedom as well. The Russian theologian and philosopher Andrey Kuraev noted: "The world, as it was before the man, was a monologue, lacking anything independent of the will of the Maker… [With the creation of Man – *the author O.C.*] God limits His omnipotence, creating in the existence a sphere, which He cannot enter without knocking first... The world now incorporates all the unpredictability of a personal and loving dialogue." [4] Due to the original sin, mankind has fallen from grace, shedding the gift of communion with God and experiencing death.

The fall of Man is revealed in Eastern Christianity to be the gravest guilt that caused God's Incarnation for the sake of redemption and salvation of the human race.

According to Gregory of Nyssa, since the moment of the fall of Man a conciliar individual acquires a dual character. As an individual nature, it becomes a part of the whole, one of the constituent elements of the objective world (this includes the differences between the sexes, passionary and bodily, sensual and sinful). At the same time, the opposite aspect of human nature is retained, this being the unitotality of an individual, encompassing the perfection of nature, mind, reason, beauty, virtue, wisdom. Saint Gregory outlines the essence of the human nature as follows: "While two natures – the Divine and

incorporeal nature, and the irrational life of brutes – are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the mean between them" [1, p. 51-52]. Let us stress once again that the medieval spiritual culture is known for this fixation on the inconsistency of human nature.

The Byzantine philosophers linked this dichotomy with the psycho-physical division of a human being into three parts: *body, soul and spirit*. The first apologists and early Church Fathers – Arnobius, Lactantius, Origen, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Nemesius et al – noted the highest purpose of mind and spirit and emphasized the sharply negative attitude to the body with its carnal drives, similar to those of the animals. Christianity was not inclined to an absolute condemnation of flesh, as it was not inclined to the absolute rejection of the created world. However, the interpretation of flesh by Eastern Church Fathers is contradictory: to some extent, flesh is viewed as a 'prison for the soul', yet at the same time the created body is pleasing to its Maker, and therefore there was a task of a conceptual explanation of the spiritualization of body.

The Eastern Church Fathers showed the complexity of the contradictory relationship of sensual and spiritual origins. Marking the advantages and the positive properties of the body, which are initial and paramount in a person, they proved a cult of spirit and spiritual activity. Of great importance in this context are the works of Saint Athanasius of Alexandria. He defended the position that *spirit* and *soul*, being in unity with human nature, offer an opportunity to avoid delusions and come to knowing the supreme Truth. Human spirit should strive for its foretype – the Holy Spirit. This drive is already inherent to the human consciousness. "Neither as God Himself is above all, is the road to Him afar off or outside ourselves, but it is in us and it is possible to find it from ourselves… And if one were to ask, what road is this? I say that it is the soul of each one of us, and the intelligence which resides there. For by it alone can God be contemplated and perceived." [5] The self-knowledge of one's soul, one's inner world is the initial phase of the God-knowing in the epistemological aspect of Anthropology regarding Eastern Patristics.

The Eastern Church Fathers sometimes show human nature in the form of a threefold composition of spirit, soul, and body, and sometimes as a union of body and soul. The difference between *trichotomy* and *dichotomy* is terminological. The followers of the dichotomy regarded 'spirit' as the supreme ability of intelligent soul, able by the means of which a person enters into communion with God. In the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers of the age of Christology disputes, the division of the integral image of an individual into dichotomy and trichotomy models occurs with the explicit purpose to assert the dominance of the spiritual principle as an opportunity to achieve perfection and to determine the reason in the transforming world, once created as a reflection of the Maker. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, adhering to the Apostolic tradition of understanding man, calls one "… 'carnal', which is busied with the belly and the pleasures connected with it, another 'natural', which holds a middle position with regard to virtue and vice, rising above the one, but without pure

participation in the other; and another 'spiritual', which perceives the perfection of godly life" [1, p. 24]. Basil of Caesarea called human soul 'widow' if it has fallen from grace and God's spiritual essence [6].

Personality embraces all parts of the natural composition of Man. Since Christian God is transcendent in relation to the world, then the fundamental structural units of a human being (i.e. spirit, soul, body) should also show some transcendence. The philosophical justification is as follows: the spiritual components of the human image are partly unexplainable phenomena, and therefore they belong to the open transcendent sphere, also being the proof of their own supernatural (Divine) origin from the Patristics point of view.

The Byzantine Orthodox anthropology turned out to be antinomic, open in its essence toward the Divine transcendent direction as well as toward the mundane, human one. Such unity of opposites within the framework of the Byzantine cultural system exalted the spiritual (i.e. the Divine) principle in Man and at the same time spiritualized the carnal origin. That was a newly discovered by Christianity trend in culture since in ancient Greek philosophy spirit was exalted and separated from the flesh, and the question of the body's spiritual improvement was practically non-existent.

The general concept of the integral human image, as seen in the works of the Church Fathers, *spirit* was allocated as the structural dominant, prevailing at all stages of the Christian culture's development. An individual, according to this doctrine, reaches perfection only in spiritual likeness to the nature of God, in aspiration to communion to uncreated absolute values and concepts. It is exactly spirit in the Eastern Christian cultural tradition that appears as a phenomenon capable of leading an individual beyond the earthly world, allowing the transcendence to God, which can be achieved only in the perfection of nature, common to all people, i.e. in the state of the conciliar ecclesial mind. That provision is among the grounds of Christian anthropology.

By approaching the Absolute through spirit and reason, an individual becomes open to the Divine world, thus *removing* the contradictions of the transcendent, spiritual and earthly, carnal worlds. The Old Testament canon of the creation of Man in the image and after the likeness of God meant, in the end, the *removal* of the dualistic essence of a human through *unity* with the deity.

Gregory of Nazianzus, just like the other Cappadocian Fathers, saw Man as a creature that stops the enmity of spiritual and corporeal: "For I consist of soul and flesh. And the soul is a ray of endless light – God; and flesh is begotten from the darkness. And these are *united*. If I make one common creature, the enmity is stopped. But if a violent enmity inside me is irreconcilable, then I do not make one creature, woven from soul and flesh. For *not hostile* but *friendly* origins yield creation." [7] The common nature of Man is prepared for something bigger – for spiritual equality with God, for deification, and therefore, for the establishment of God-likeness in the created world to the possible extent.

Rightfully, the general method of Christian anthropology is described by the Byzantine researchers as a method of *doubling the world*, establishing the antimony of earthly and heavenly human lives and of the actual existence of

both natural and supernatural worlds. However, Greek-Byzantine Patristics didn't dismantle the basic concepts that define the human essence to antagonistic contradictions. The task was, on the basis of soul-body dualism to design an individual as the sole perfect God-like creature, able to overcome that dualism and reconcile spiritual and material existences, thus bringing an imperfect world to harmony. This cosmic goal, stemming from the comprehension of Man as a universal being, has always been closely associated with the specific task of every individual – the salvation of the soul from death and achievement of spiritual immortality.

Salvation was substantiated as an endless way of moral and spiritual self-perfection, described by the concept of *deification* (i.e. reaching the communion with God, a perception of the Divine life). The Byzantine tradition claimed that Man was originally created gravitating to God. Deification is the potential ability of an individual to perceive and assimilate God's energy, to strive for unity with Him in the constant *spiritual doing* of a human's nature. Maximus the Confessor explains Man's desire to God by drawing a distinction between the concepts of *God by grace* and *God in essence*. An individual is called to become a 'created God by grace' unlike Christ, who is 'God in essence' or 'by nature'. "God made us so that we might become 'partakers of the divine nature'" (2 Peter 1.4) and sharers in His eternity, and so that we might come to be like Him (1 John 3.2) through "deification by grace" [8, p. 177]. It is through deification that all things are reconstituted and achieve their permanence; and it is for its sake that what is not is brought into being and given existence [9]. Thus, the process of *deification* is two-directional: it must be accomplished by both the divine will and by the human activity, by the righteous life.

Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius of Alexandria, John Climacus, Dionysius the Areopagite laid the foundations of the Christian concept, according to which the potential desire for deification is the gradual ascend of mind to the contemplation of God through the breaking of creation, carnal sensuality and mundane hardships. However, the way out of this world to the Divine life should be performed not by a biological human but by a *spiritual person* through the *reasonable* beginning of his personality. That is why Eastern Patristics marked the path to God as a way of internal self-concentration and moral austerity. The true life, according to the Greek-Byzantine theologians, is *dying* in this world, not bearing the amplitude of God-likeness and God-knowing.

Human activity in transforming and saving the created world, comparable only to the salvation of Man and mankind, once performed by Jesus Christ, is accentuated and profoundly described by Maximus the Confessor. In his most symbolic text 'Mystagogy' he cultivates the main human purpose that is to unite the earthly world with the Logos or to fulfil the legacy of the whole existence's deification. Firstly, an individual must perform the deification in oneself, in different parts of own being, in miniature representing different parts of the world. Deification is achieved through the free and conscious direction of all the soul's forces to God in order to unite with Him [10].

Saint Maximus the Confessor outlines the path: first of all, a person must overcome the biological division into male and female by dispassion; then one needs to connect the earthly world and heavens by leading the holy life; then an individual should by angel-like virtue refine own body and feelings to open the heaven's door, unite with the worlds of thoughts and angels, and, finally, connect in Love with God Himself. If a person fulfils this assignment, subjecting the lower needs to the highest, body to reason, reason to God, he will achieve unity with God and establish the harmony with the corresponding parts of the Universe. World, God, and Man would exist as a great harmonious organism. St. Maximus writes: "Then man, as a part of the whole and as a small part of the great, will resurrect with the world, receiving back the power of eternal incorruptibility. Then, by grace and glory, body will become like soul and the sensual will become like intelligible due to the clear and active presence of the manifested divine power in everything and everyone; through itself, the power will observe the unbreakable bonds of unity for eternity." [11] And this is the great purpose of Man – to achieve personal deification and through it to deify the existence itself.

4. Conclusions

Within the framework of Byzantine culture and philosophical theorizing, Eastern theology created not only a coherent structure of the theocentric universe but also shaped the principles and canons of religious anthropology. The Patristics' anthropological concept may be considered as a kind of socio-cultural integrity, a peculiar foretype in determining the typology of Byzantine's spirituality and style of thinking.

The phenomenon of Man in Eastern Patristics was derived not only in cosmological terms but also in psychophysiological and philosophical – as the subject of the relationship between God and the world. In this context, we may claim that the texts of the Eastern Church Fathers are anthropocentric. The representatives of the Patristics tradition had designed the doctrine of human being which was based on a new, activity-transforming approach to an individual, aimed at improving the spiritual and physical appearance of each person, the spiritualization of his whole essence.

The problem of personality in Eastern Patristics is naturally presented as the *relationship between God* and *an individual*. Therefore, the conceptual apprehension of the essence of Man and the aspects of his life – the freedom of choice and predetermination of moral relationship in a community, the strive for spiritual life and material dependence at the same time – was closely connected with almost all the Christian canons, primarily, with the dogmas of Incarnation, Redemption, Resurrection and Salvation. Religious anthropology existed as a powerful trend in the early Byzantine theology, philosophy and spiritual culture, still remaining relevant to this day thanks to its moral orientation and profound meaning.

Acknowledgement

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