

Language as an Instrument of the Theological Study: *as Related to the Specifics of the Eastern Theological Tradition*

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Presently in Russia theology is being introduced into the realm of scholarly discourse, or more broadly, into scholarly study. Though this process is nothing new for European scholarly awareness and its system of higher education (remembering that theology as a discipline was not only taken as a matter of course in medieval universities, but considered essential, and that the European universities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were, in fact, theological schools), in Russia, where such a practice was unknown, theology still must prove its right to scholarly status. At the same time, in Russian scholarly circles there is a growing interest in the discussion of questions traditionally related to the study of theology. The obvious illustration of this process are the permanent scientific conferences dedicated to questions such as the relation between science, philosophy, and theology in the face of the threat of social, ecological, and other catastrophes.

However, these conferences cannot answer the question of the extent to which modern theology corresponds to the criteria of scholarly authenticity. For example, there was an attempt to introduce theology into the system of higher education of the Russian Federation. The Ministry of Education included theology in the list of subject areas for preparation and specialization of higher professional education (Order No. 686 of 2 March 2000). To implement the order, the Ministry formed a working group on theology and developed a set of standards. Certainly such a “revolutionary” (or “reforming”?) decision led to rather hot disputes in the scientific world which continue to the present day. Questions about the expediency of teaching theology within the higher (secular) educational system were discussed, for instance at Moscow State University in the framework of a round table on 5-6 February 2004 entitled “Relevant

Problems of Religious Studies.” According to www.religare.ru, “in spite of their amiability and the polite tone of the discussion, scholars of religious studies differ in many of their evaluations.” For example, the chairman of the Department of Religious Studies of the Philosophy Faculty of St. Petersburg State University, Professor Marianna Shakhnovich, assumes that the Russian field of religious studies “has a centuries-old tradition, which may be traced back to M. V. Lomonosov and was formed at the end of the nineteenth century.” On the other hand, the co-editor of the journal *Religious Studies*, senior-lecturer Alexander Krasnikov, maintains that this science is only ten years old. He and his colleagues attribute its poorly-prepared methodology and conceptual framework to the “youthfulness” of religious studies as a science in Russia. The chairman of the Department of Religious Studies of the Philosophy Faculty of Moscow State University, Professor Igor Yablokov, analyzed the correlation between such concepts as “religious studies,” “philosophy of theology,” “history of religions,” “philosophy of religions,” etc. He found that professional scholars in the field of religious studies do not have a mutual understanding of these terms. On the basis of the above, one may easily conclude that the question of a method of theological studies that would adequately reflect the specifics of the Eastern theological tradition is still open. Although this question is not as much unexamined in the Western tradition as it is in the Eastern, I would like to avoid any uncritical transference of the methodological

scheme of the Western pattern onto the Eastern, at least until such time as specific Eastern aspects of the understanding of language are analyzed as a method of theological study, since a wide spectrum of questions concerning the terminology of theological concepts is relevant to this point.

The development of Christian theological terminology is deeply connected to the history of the Christian church. The process of forming dogmatic terminology obviously reflects the stages of the disclosure of Christological dogma and the dogma of the Holy Trinity in church teaching. The specific character of a religious term depends on its position between the realm of human consciousness, the world that can be apprehended by human intellect, and the realm of the noumenal, which cannot be comprehended or embraced by human reason. One may suppose that the formation of theological terminology is the result of concretization, which is accomplished by human reason in order to explain mystical events and essences that are revealed to human consciousness in an “extraordinary” way and often in the form of symbols.

One of the basic differences between theology and the various secular sciences is the fact that in the appearance of other terminological systems (often parallel to those that existed before) does not lead to the tragic disruption of unity in scientific discourse. In theology the rejection of commonly used terminology inevitably leads to the appearance of heresies and church schism (at the same time we may assume that the appearance of “alternative” terminology systems

in theology is the consequence of disagreement in theological views). In support of the first supposition, we may mention the traditions of word usage found among certain groups of the so-called Old Believers (Orthodox Christian groups that did not agree with the church policy of Patriarch Nikon and left the Russian Orthodox Church). According to their traditions, Old Believers consider some lexemes used in "Nikonian" theology taboo, no matter what their meaning. These words were not acceptable simply because they were "too new," and not because of any meaning they contained.

The reason for this is due to the characteristic of a given theological term. In other words, it is related to the correlation of the term to the noumenal world, to those concepts that are apprehended through faith.

The impossibility of any empirical test makes a theological concept and its corresponding term the subject of special attention among believers. In this way believers indicate the value of the distinctive "bridge" that connects them to the world beyond the senses.

The problem of the inner and outer connotations of a religious term is especially relevant for Eastern theology. The church fathers paid special attention to this theme. In the twentieth century the problem again became relevant because of the Aphonic polemic concerning the names of God, which drew in the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and a number of well-known Russian theologians and philosophers. The core of this polemic was related to the attempt

to clarify the correlation between the names of God and the divine nature.

We may assume that the theological problem that led to this polemic and allows us to define some of the peculiarities of language as an instrument for constructing theological discourse is rooted in the theology of Origen, whose influence on Eastern-Slavonic theological traditions is often underestimated by scholars.

Although Origen's attitude to language may easily startle the modern reader, Eastern theological tradition respects his opinion: Origen taught that language may have elements that are non-arbitrary in essence. In other words, Origen acknowledges the use of language that has no semantic meaning, but contains contextual grammatical meaning. It is possible that the peculiarities of the interpretation of the role of language as an instrument in theological studies in the Eastern and Western traditions were formed as a natural development of Origen's theory in the East and the logic of William of Ockham in the West. This contradiction may be considered as the opposition between mystical and logical principles in theology. William of Ockham made a significant contribution to the development of medieval logic, which he understood primarily as a science of signs which are a reproduction of distinct objects. According to Ockham, there is no independent substance; any substance that existed somewhere at some time is only something where and when; therefore, quantity and quality do not exist independently as self-existing reality. Actually, according to Ockham, there is no relationship in and of

itself, but only the relationship that exists between distinct objects, that is to say, between certain relations.

Names do not represent or imitate for Origen—names point to the deepest meaning of objects, signifying their nature. Origen considers that divine names are “summing up denominations which give the real essence of the named object”—they manifest divine power. Origen attributes the power of divine names to a non-arbitrary correspondence between the signifier and the signified, the name and the divinity. Moreover, Origen accepts that the power of a divine name is automatic and not based on the intention of the speaker.¹

Perhaps for this reason the differentiation and classification of concepts is not so much characteristic of Eastern theology as the notion that the meaning of a term can never be reduced to the formal semantic. Behind the word one may always perceive its sub-verbal existence (or, at least, meaning). That is why in the Eastern tradition the meaning of a term is partly unexplained and not strictly defined. Often a term is perceived not as an element of a language and subject to its laws, but as a kind of icon, a window into the supernatural world.

The study of the development of modern Greek Orthodox exegesis leads to the conclusion that for this tradition systematic hermeneutical research is not as relevant as the attempt at correlation between patristic teaching and the understanding of in-

dividual biblical texts. For example, the “neo-patristic school,” which is currently actively developing, makes its goal the systematic teaching of the church fathers (including their hermeneutic conclusions) in modern conditions. However, in the patristic tradition linguistic studies were never dominant, but rather a way of “submersion in” or “entering into” the text. At the same time, the notion of text and context, for example, in the teaching of the Alexandrian fathers is often undifferentiated and the meaning of the text is presented as a function of the spiritual context. The patristic tradition of allegorical exegesis developed from this as a protest against the limitation of the higher meaning by textual frames. The ancient world already knew the allegorical interpretation of pagan myths that were developed by various philosophical school and traditions. The allegorical method of Scripture interpretation dominates the works of most church authors in the first two centuries.² It is interesting to note that one distinguishing characteristic of Christian allegorism, related to the epistles of the apostle Paul, is the belief in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.³

In the context of our study, an allegory is a manifestation of faith, which, in Christianity, to one degree or another, is the dogmatic interpretation of Scripture. Allegory is revealed in symbols; that is why the lan-

¹ Matthew J. Martin, “Origen’s Theory of Language and the First Two Columns of Hexapla,” *Harvard Theological Review* (January 2004): 100.

² Archbishop Illarion (Troitskiy), *Ocherki iz istorii dogmata o Tserkvi* (1912), 77.

³ G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.1, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans), 260.

guage of mysticism is also symbolic. For this very reason it is sometimes difficult to define allegorical and mystic discourses, although when we take into account the fact that allegory reveals the meaning of symbols it is possible to see the difference between them.⁴ In order to understand both early and medieval exegesis correctly one should take into consideration the correlation between allegory and mystical symbolism and be able to see the difference between them. The connection between allegory and symbol, often leading to the confusion of these concepts, is mostly defined by the specifics of the language of the mystic. But it is possible to distinguish between them since *allegory characteristically interprets the symbol*.⁵ This character of allegory was the foundation for allegorical exegesis in the early church. Since the goal of exegesis was to interpret the symbols of spiritual life contained in the text of Scripture, the value of the text began to depend on the symbols of the text, which needed to be theologically interpreted. The result of this was an extended understanding of the symbolism of Scripture—symbolical meaning was attributed to every passage, sentence and even word in the Bible.⁶

Inasmuch as the Bible is a text written in natural historical language, one should not forget the basic semiotic concepts of the unity of form and content of a symbol. The symbol itself (as an artificial sign) is constituted only

through the dialectical combination of the represented object and the object that represents it. However, the unity of form and content of a sign is subjective in character; it does not exist outside of the human mind. Since on the sign level one cannot separate the form of the sign from its content, then on that level the separation of the form from the content may lead to either detextualization or to a situation in which the meaning of the text loses the objective content understandable to all native speakers (in this case we are not examining the question of a subjective reading of the text).

In the present day it has become evident that the relationship of meaning-text applied to Holy Scripture does not have as definite a character as it was assumed to have in nineteenth century exegesis.

Modern biblical scholarship has also tended to assume that meaning belongs, without remainder, to the point of a text's formation. This characterization of texts is unnecessarily restrictive. Robert Wuthnow notes that cultural products, including texts, sometimes relate in an enigmatic fashion to their social environment: "They draw resources, insights, and inspiration from environment: they reflect it, speak to it, and make themselves relevant to it. And yet they also remain autonomous enough from their social environment to acquire a broader, even universal and timeless appeal." He thus affirms what David Tracy develops in relation to "classics": some

⁴ Macleod, C. W., "Allegory and Mysticism in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, new series, Vol. 22, part ii (October 1971): 364-365.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), 76.

texts have the capacity to speak to, but also beyond, the situations within which they were formed.⁷

At the same time, the historical analysis of Holy Scripture cannot be limited to only historic-contextual studies. Belief in the ontological being of the universe and the apostolic church is present in the Eastern tradition, especially in the fact that the study of Holy Scripture cannot have a secular character, because it is, a priori, the activity of the church. Consequently, these studies should be done in the language of the church, that language through which apostolic traditions are transferred to other generations.

Development is possible in traditional cultures, but only if its fruits are in concord with tradition, that is if they do not contradict but enrich it. In other words tradition is alive only when it assumes that no transfer of knowledge can be completely identical and that some kind of development is inherent in the transfer itself. In this case "innovation" ceases to be taken as such if it finds its place in discourse ordered by tradition.

The orthodox view of history, as it bears on the question of religious truth, is that the transmission of tradition from the ancients to the moderns is, in principle, reliable. Tradition itself is a sound vehicle for divine knowledge. Thus, in the Jewish case, for example, some of the rabbis claim that the interpretations of the late sages were vouchsafed to

Moses on Sinai. The interpretations of later sages are not (radically) novel. They discover or unpack what God had embedded in the Mosaic Torah. In the most important sense, the sense in which religious truth is uncovered within the history, the history does not entail novelty.⁸

Both tradition and Scripture are indivisible from language; they are realized in the linguistic perspective, but surpass it in that they cannot always be verbalized. In any case, language is not separable from faith of the church.

At least for one covenantal community in the modern world, historically based analysis of sacred texts, carefully done with an eye towards the later tradition, can provide an outlet for religious commitment and even bolster it. This mode of study can deepen one's sense of belonging to an ancient and ongoing conversation.⁹

However, language does not only preserve religious traditions, but also takes part in their formation. In connection with this, one can understand the relevance of the liturgical aspect of Eastern-Slavonic theology as the quintessence of church consciousness and the avid discussions about liturgical language. In the Eastern-Slavonic world with its special church-political context, this aspect is deeply rooted in the events of the twentieth century, when the structural existence of the church in Russia was under threat of destruction in the light of the founda-

⁷ Joel B. Green, "Scripture and Theology," *Interpretation* (April 2002): 8-9.

⁸ Alan Mittelman, "Toleration, Liberty and

Truth," *Harvard Theological Review* (April 2002): 368.

⁹ *Interpretation* (January 2006): 20.

tion of an atheistic society declared by the Soviet state. In conditions when the existence of the church was challenged by the state, and the political state of affairs evolved quickly, the liturgical tradition became sacred in the consciousness of believers, including the fixed, unchanging language of the liturgy.

The academic dichotomy between text and ritual remains entrenched, however, as witnessed by the different (sub)disciplines and their associated journals dedicated to each subject even within a given religious tradition. In this essay, rather than playing down either ritual or texts in favor of the other, I want to point out and explain the interdependence of texts and rituals. That interdependence is readily apparent in contemporary religious liturgies and governmental ceremonies that highlight the reading and manipulation of the texts. For example procession with Torah scrolls and Gospel books utilize texts and ritual objects, as political and judicial oath ceremonies.¹⁰

This observation is easily applicable to the contemporary condition of the Eastern theological tradition; moreover, it is not the first instance in the history of the Russian church when liturgical language obtained a sacral character. Changes in liturgical language became one of the reasons for the Old Believer schism in the seventeenth century. These processes have interesting parallels in history, especially taking into consideration the fact that during times of persecution frequently the form begins to be worshiped more than the content. I am ready to suggest that the function of language, the preservation and transfer of religious experience, and the sacralization of form (including linguistic forms) are interrelated processes that may be found in various religious traditions and cultures. The process of the sacralization of form indicates that a given religious tradition is in a condition of active opposition to social processes. Time will show the extent to which this conclusion may be applied to modern Russia.

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¹⁰ James W. Watts, "Ritual Legitimacy and Scriptural Authority," Journal of Biblical Literature (Fall 2005): 401-402.