

Apophatism and Cataphatism in Protestantism

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St. Dionysius the Areopagite in his marvelous treatise “Mystic Theology,” relating, probably, to the early Middle Ages, introduced a notion of two ways of the Christian knowledge of God.¹ The first way is cataphatic (καταφατικός), consisting of traditional positive statements (for example, “God is light,” 1Jn 1:5); and the second is apophatic (ἀποφατικός), based on complete negation (for example, continuing the thought in 1Jn 1:5, “There is no darkness in Him”).

Cataphatic knowledge is more accessible and customary. At the same time, it has obvious, previously determined borders that cannot be transcended. Apophatism, on the other hand, is capable of breaking through the vicious circle, or accomplishing a spiritual ascension to the Lord. Knowledge, however, in the usual sense of the word, disappears; language becomes silent, proving itself powerless to express the inexpressible, and primacy is given to prayerful-mystical fellowship with the invisible, incomprehensible God, who cannot be depicted and, at the same time, loves us without limit and is close to us. The feasible combination of both methods of knowing God is, apparently, the very blessing that a Christian ought to strive for, until God Himself answers all questions in eternity.

Immersing ourselves in the divine wisdom of Scripture, we meet apophatic statements on almost every page. The foundation of God’s law, the Ten Commandments, is almost completely apophatic. The Decalogue, uniquely giving people freedom in the Lord, teaches the things that a person

¹ See also other treatises of Dionysius the Areopagite, especially “Bozhestvennye imena” [Divine names] in *Misticheskoe bogoslovie* [Mystical theology] (Kiev: Put’ k istine, 1991).

should *not* do, rather than do: You shall not make for yourself an idol; you shall not take the name of the Lord in vain; you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor; you shall not covet your neighbor's house... What is the sense of all this? The cataphatic way of thinking is so limited and superficial that it can be normally considered only as an addition (or some small part) in relation to apophatism, which has an inexpressibly wider and deeper world view.

In Isa 64:4 and 1Co 2:9 we find a surprising promise: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." At first glance the apophatic approach suggested here (by means of several negations) to the theme of eternity carries little information and seems to lose out to the cataphatic approach (if we compare it with the detailed description of the heavenly Jerusalem in Rev 21). However, such bias immediately disappears as soon as we somehow manage to master the apophatic method, and then even the brief "negative" description of heaven in the Bible is wonderfully transformed.

"Things that the eye has not seen..." apophatically exclaim the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Paul. Let us simplify the idea, reducing it to the cataphatic level: what things have our eyes seen on earth? Certain-

ly, in the fallen world we meet much evil and sin. At the same time, a person has the opportunity to enjoy the masterpieces of great artists, sculptors, and architects; we can see the magnificence of divine creation all around. Yet, according to Isaiah and Paul, that is *nothing*² when compared to the things God has prepared for His children from all eternity.

"Things that the ear has not heard..." Living on earth we hear declarations of love from people who are dear to our heart, the penetrating word of Christian preaching, and affecting singing—yet even these things are *nothing*, bearing heaven in mind!

"Things that have not entered the heart of man..." Although already many wonderful, spirit-ennobling ideas and creative revelations occur to us, nevertheless all these things are absolutely *nothing* in comparison with what will come true in eternity!

Thus, starting from cataphatism, which is usual for most people, we gradually move to the apophatic way, already meditated on by some of the church fathers, a way fearlessly proclaiming the superiority of a person's ignorance!³ As it is written: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body *I do not know*, or out of the body *I do not know*, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body *I do not know*,

² Elsewhere in the Pauline epistles we also find complete negation (οὐδέν) of whatever is good or loving in man: "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am *nothing*. And if I give all my possessions to feed [the poor], and if I surrender my

body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me *nothing*" (1Co 13:2-3).

³ V. Lossky, "Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviia vostochnoi tserkvi" [Study of mystical theology of the eastern church], in V. Lossky, *Bogovidenie* [Vision of God] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AST, 2003), 125-135.

God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard *inexpressible* words, which a man *is not permitted* to speak” (2Co 12:2-4).

The most educated of people, who only a short while before belonged to the elite of Jewish society, the apostle Paul humbly recognizes the inability of his mind and language to describe divine mysteries. What then can be said about other people? “We know in part and we prophesy in part; for now we see in a mirror dimly...” (1Co 13:9.12). This is the destiny of every person living on earth. As the poet said:

*...I pity people,
who do not know God,
I pity people,
who know all about Him.*⁴

Mystical theology, based on the apophatic method, in due time received sufficient recognition in the Christian world in both the West and East,⁵ although greater respect, probably, has been expressed for apophatism by the Orthodox Church, so far. Protestantism, which is frequently (and often deservedly) accused of excessive rationalism, actually has remained indifferent to this issue. The present brief research intends to show, strange as it may seem, that Protestants have even more grounds (in comparison with Roman Catholics and Orthodox) to include apophatism

in their common epistemological concept.

First of all, we see Protestant apophatism in the refusal to honor any kind of sacred images and objects (icons, statues, holy relics, holy water, etc.). Having intentionally deprived themselves of reliance on a material beginning, most followers of the Reformation worship the God Invisible, who cannot be portrayed. Having put their trust in statements of Scripture,⁶ and having declined ambiguous, frequently inconsistent church traditions on the given theme, Protestants, unexpectedly for themselves, have found a number of doubtless theological advantages over historical churches. For even the most perfect of icons is inherently similar to anthropomorphic statements about God in the Bible, which, undoubtedly, condescend to the cataphatic thinking of feeble humanity, as though God actually had ears,⁷ eyes,⁸ lips,⁹ hands,¹⁰ feet,¹¹ wings,¹² feathers,¹³ etc. Such imaginative illustrations are probably in a certain way necessary for infants in faith and knowledge (including Protestants). But just as it would be unthinkable to set oneself the task of portraying, for example, a living human soul,¹⁴ so it is likewise unreal to paint the soul’s Original, the invisible God. In fact, few people doubt that man is created in the im-

⁴ Ieromonach Roman, <http://tropinka.orthodoxy.ru/zal/poezija/roman/index.htm>

⁵ Lossky, *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶ Ex 20:4-6; Dt 4:15-19. It is relevant to remember here that the Ten Commandments belong to eternal ordinances. It would be as inconceivable for Protestants to break the prohibition concerning “sacred images” as it would be absurd to cast doubt on commands not to take God’s name in vain, not to commit adultery, not to steal, etc.

⁷ 2Ki 19:16; Ps 17:6.

⁸ Ezr 5:5; Ps. 33:18.

⁹ Nu 12:8; Isa 58:14.

¹⁰ Ex 24:11; Ac 2:33

¹¹ Ex 24:10; Lk 20:43.

¹² Ru 2:12; Ps 17:8.

¹³ Ps 91:4

¹⁴ Although some people try to do it on the level of comics today.

¹⁵ Heb 13:14; Php 3:20.

age of God and according to His likeness, not in terms of his body, but of his soul (reason, feelings, will). And apophatism—as a more perfect way—points directly to the invisible God, notably both in the Old (Ex 33:20) and New Testaments: “... who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen” (1Ti 6:16).

Thus, mature Protestantism, having followed Scripture, involuntarily moves to the way of apophatism, accessible only to those who have left infancy behind. And then much more is revealed to a Christian as compared to what he knew before. In this context, Protestant indifference to pilgrimage to the Holy Land (during the Reformation and later) becomes more understandable, because the true Jerusalem for a Christian is a heavenly Jerusalem, instead of an earthly one.¹⁵ On those occasions when an Orthodox or Roman Catholic believer must cross himself, it is sufficient for a Protestant to pray mentally; and usually he does it with his eyes closed, not resorting to the intermediation of any material image. The Protestant worship service is inherently apophatic, as is their church architecture, and the internal decoration of their prayer houses. The Russian poet F. I. Tiutchev, who was sensitive to issues of faith, perfectly expressed this peculiarity of Protestantism in 1834:

*I love the Lutherans' divine service,
Their ritual strict, significant,
and simple –
These bare walls and empty Temple
I understand the high teaching of.*¹⁶

At Sunday school Protestants do not forbid children to use drawings (cataphatic method); they do not, however, accept any worship of these images. Here we can remember a curious paradox observed many times in the history of Christianity: churches in which icons were painted quite often persecuted secular painting (mainly in the Middle Ages), and Protestants usually were not so strict about it.¹⁷ Thus, followers of the Reformation, as a rule, traced a basic difference between the religious and secular character of art, showing severity in the former case and condescension in the latter. The heavenly Original is too great and inexpressible to dare to show Him by any selection of paints, while the inaccuracy of artists in depicting the fallen material world is quite pardonable. That which is useful and permissible for children quite often is not so for adults, and that is why most Protestants recommend leaving behind imperfect images and, with fear and trembling, moving to a more excellent way, directly addressing the invisible God.

But Christ came to earth in the flesh, people will tell us. In the New Testament we read: “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father,

¹⁶ F. Tiutchev, *Stikhotvoreniia* [Poetry] (Moscow: Pravda, 1978), 108.

¹⁷ Even John Calvin, famous for his extreme strictness toward all “secular” things, wrote: “And yet I am not gripped by the superstition of thinking absolutely no images are permissible. But because sculpture and painting are gifts of God, I seek a

pure and legitimate use of each...” Calvin allowed the realization of creative talents outside the religious realm in depicting historical events, people, and nature. He even considered it useful and aesthetically pleasant (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973], Vol. I, 112).

has made Him known” (Jn 1:18); “[Christ]... is the image of God invisible” (2Co 4:4). Does this mean, then, that it is possible to portray the invisible Lord? Hardly. Indeed, Christ did, indeed, come to people in flesh as a true human being, but that does not diminish apophatism in knowing the Lord, for who is capable of depicting Christ as the Son of God and God the Son? Here the brush in the hands of the icon painter fails.¹⁸ It is not difficult to imagine a situation in which the Lord Jesus would choose an apostle not only from the Jews, who were not trained to draw and sculpt, but also a Greek, competent in the fine arts, and then take care to preserve His images and statues for future generations.

But that was not pleasing to the Savior at all. He went in the completely opposite direction, which is best to be deferred to by all of His future disciples: “...While they were eating, He took [some] bread, and after a blessing He broke [it], and gave [it] to them, and said, ‘Take [it], this is My body.’ And when He had taken a cup [and] given thanks ...said to them, ‘This is My blood of the covenant,

which is poured out for many’” (Mk 14:22-24).

Thus, it was not an icon that Christ left after Himself, but the Lord’s Supper.¹⁹ The Eucharistic bread and cup, externally unlike a human being, apophatically reveals the Lord to Christians completely: “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1Co 10:16). Hence, Christ left the bread and cup to us for Holy Communion, and the New Testament everywhere mentions them along with the words that rationalistic understanding cannot comprehend, that they are, in essence, the Body and Blood of Christ.²⁰ At the same time, the statement about the invisible presence of the Body and Blood of the Savior at the Lord’s Supper in the biblical text invariably switches over to a repeated mention of the bread and cup, meaning completely interchangeable, synonymous concepts. In 1Co 10:16-17 this pattern could be expressed by the following scheme:

Cup – Blood

Bread – Body – Bread – Body – Bread

¹⁸ Gregory Palamas (fourteenth century) and his followers decided this problem by dividing God’s essence (which cannot be comprehended and portrayed) and His “energies” (which are efficaciously displayed in any theophany even by means of material objects, for instance icons). See Prot. J. Meyendorff, *Zhizn’ i trudy Svyatitelia Grigoriia Palamy. Vvedenie v izuchenie* [Life and works of Blessed Gregory of Palamas: Introduction to the study] (St. Petersburg: Byzantinorossica, 1997). Yet we cannot help but notice a hidden theological attempt, finally, to give preference to the cataphatic method of knowing God. For if the matter is put this way, people still “see God” not as He is, but in the extremely simplified form in which the Unfathomable One reveals Himself to man who cannot comprehend His fullness. This

also relates to God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, who was certainly visible as Man and incomprehensible as God.

¹⁹ This biblical fact was pointed out by Byzantine theologians more than once during the iconoclast movement in the eighth century, but also long before them, e.g. John Chrysostom taught: “How many today say, ‘I wish I could see the face of Christ, His image, clothing, shoes. Lo! Thou seest Him [in the Eucharist], Thou touchest Him, thou eatest Him. And thou indeed desirest to see His clothes, but He giveth Himself to thee not to see only, but also to touch and eat...” (*Homily 82 on the Gospel of Mathew*), http://oldes.tstu.ru/orthodox/library/mirror/ccel/Zlatmat2/Mat2_82.html

²⁰ Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19-20, and so on.

In the Eucharistic text frequently quoted, 1Co 11:23-29, the given scheme is more complex:

Bread – Body – Bread – Bread –
Body – Bread – Body

Cup – Blood – Cup – Cup – Blood –
Cup

Here we can remember Jo 6:48-58 in which Jesus calls Himself the bread of life:

Bread – Bread – Bread – Bread –
Bread – Flesh – Flesh – Flesh –
Flesh – Flesh – Flesh – Bread –
Bread

Bearing in mind the known differences between Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant approaches to the interpretation of the Lord's Supper, can the apophatic approach to the problem help us in any way? Certainly! Already in the Athanasian Creed there appears a statement about the unconfoundability and indivisibility of the Holy Trinity.²¹ The fathers of the Fourth (Chalcedonian, 451) and Sixth (Constantinople, 680-681) Ecumenical Councils²² arrived at the same idea, only in connection with a Christological problem—in what way the two natures and two wills of the Lord Jesus

Christ relate to each other. The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, in his most important work “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520) came very close to the same idea concerning Holy Communion:

I... after floating in a sea of doubt, at last found rest for my conscience in the view... that it is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and blood are present... No one may fear to become guilty of heresy if he should believe in the presence of real bread and real wine on the altar, and that every one may feel at liberty to ponder, hold and believe either one view or the other, without endangering his salvation... I firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ... In order that the real body and the real blood of Christ may be present in the sacrament, it is not necessary that the bread and wine be transubstantiated...²³

There are various interpretations of these amazing words. Often Luther is even accused of not making a complete break with Catholic tradition.²⁴ Nevertheless, the fact remains that Martin Luther rejected the doc-

²¹ “And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons (**neque confundentes personas**) nor dividing the substance (**neque substantiam seperantes**).” http://inokinf.by.ru/docs/symbols/athanas_latn.html?extract=1129550216

²² “...We teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man... This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly (*ἀσυχύτως*), immutably (*ἀτρέπτως*), indivisibly (*ἀδιαρέτως*), inseparably [united] (*ἀχωρίστως*).” (See A. Kartashev, *Vselenskie Sobory* (Moskva: Respublica, 1994), p. 273).

“Defining all this we likewise declare that in him are two natural wills and two natural operations indivisibly (*ἀδιαρέτως*), inconvertibly (*ἀτρέπτως*), inseparably (*ἀμερίστως*), unconfusedly (*ἀσυχύτως*), according to the teaching of the holy Fathers. And these two natural wills are not contrary the one to the other (God forbid!) as the impious heretics assert, but his human will follows and that not as resisting and reluctant, but rather as subject to his divine and omnipotent will.” (See V. Bolotov, *Lekzii po Istorii Drevney Tserkvi*, 4 vols. (Moskva, 1994), v. IV, p. 498-499).

²³ Cf. <http://svitlo.by.ru/biblioteka/luter/vavilon.htm>

²⁴ M. Erikson, *Khristianskoe bogoslovie* [Christian theology], (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 1999), 942.

trine of transubstantiation. How is it possible to reconcile these apparently mutually exclusive statements: 1) In the sacrament of communion, together with the bread and the cup of wine, the true Body and Blood of Christ are present; 2) Transubstantiation does not happen? Lutheran theologians explain it in the following, seemingly not too successful, manner: “We accept the true Body and true Blood of our Lord ‘in, with and under the blessed bread and wine’ (i.e. in bread and wine, with bread and wine, and under the appearance of bread and wine...)”²⁵ It is not completely clear how Luther understood this delicate question, but his respectful attitude to the literal sense of the Bible text (as opposed to Calvin and Zwingli, who directed the course of their thoughts to an allegorical, or “spiritual” interpretation of the Eucharistic verses of the New Testament)²⁶ seems to us worthy of the highest estimation. Yes, it may appear “unreasonable,” “irrational,” bordering on mysticism, and yet Holy Scripture, the immutable word of God affirms exactly the same things.

In a similar way we “unreasonably” believe in the Triune God (in His unconfoundability and indivisibility) or in the harmonious combination of the divine and human natures in our Savior (also necessarily unconfound-

ed and inseparable). It may seem that nothing can be more absurd than those apophatic affirmations from the point of view of common sense. Nevertheless, this belief with rare unanimity is professed by all the Christian world, including all the basic Protestant churches, and no one feels deranged or lacking in understanding. Why is it that such a remarkable theological method, tested over time, has not been applied to our consideration of the Lord’s Supper? It is a well known fact that Scripture asserts that the Eucharistic bread is actual bread and the Body of Christ at the same time,²⁷ and that the cup is actual wine and the Blood of Christ at the same time.²⁸ Maybe we are afraid to deviate from the Protestant foundation of faith? But who was a greater Protestant than Martin Luther? Yet he, standing on the firm foundation of Scripture, was not afraid to recognize its literal sense! Just as in the upper room where Christ, together with His disciples, shared the Last Supper, there were, at the same time, ordinary bread, a cup of wine, and Christ (His Flesh and Blood, and the wholeness of His Person).

The same mysterious event, as a matter of fact, occurs even at the moment of communion (breaking bread), without any transubstantiation.²⁹ This means that Eucharistic bread—

²⁵ G. Krechmar, “Sviatoe prichastie soglasno ucheniiu i ukladu Liuteranskoï Tserkvi” [Holy communion according to the teaching and structure of the Lutheran Church], *Der Bote: Zhurnal Evangelicheskoy-Luteranskoï Tserkvi* [The messenger: Journal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church], №1 (2002):8.

²⁶ Erikson, 943-945.

²⁷ Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we read Paul’s words that Jesus, breaking bread, said, “this is My Body,” not some abstract or “spiritual” Body,

but the one which “is broken for you” (1Co 11:24).

²⁸ It is said about the Eucharistic cup, “This is My Blood of the new covenant” and, again, it is not some imaginary blood, but the blood that “is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24).

²⁹ The expression “without any transubstantiation” can again be compared with the negative adverb ἀτρέπτως (“immutably,” “inconvertibly”) from the creeds of the Fourth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils.

even after the common prayer of an elder and a congregation—remains, undoubtedly, ordinary bread and simultaneously becomes the genuine Body of Christ. And these two natures remain unconfounded and inseparable from each other, just as the two natures of Christ, one-hundred percent bread and one-hundred percent His Body.

The same thing happens to the cup during communion: the wine remains wine and, at the same time, becomes the genuine Blood of our Savior, unconfounded and inseparable, one-hundred percent wine and one-hundred percent Blood, as we apophatically confess the humanly incomprehensible harmony of the two natures and wills of Jesus Christ, the true God and the true Man.

A similar view of the Lord's Supper was held by the Eastern church in ancient times. Professor N. D. Uspensky gives a number of curious citations on the given theme from works of fathers of the church.³⁰ However, beginning with the Middle Ages, cataphatic teaching about transubstantiation almost completely supersedes the old (apophatic) understanding of

communion.³¹ In this sense the condemnation of the Orthodox theologian, professor A. I. Osipov, is remarkable in that he dared recently to give a reminder concerning the "Chalcedonian" approach to the Eucharist.³²

But even if we take the most extreme statement of the problem, including transubstantiation, we ought not to fear it, in our opinion. Protestants, for some reason are often frightened even by the word "transubstantiation," traditional for Roman-Catholic and Orthodox believers in explaining the Lord's Supper. But the interchangeability of Eucharistic concepts shown above: Bread-Body (Body-Bread) and Cup-Blood (Blood-Cup) lays a New Testament foundation for us in dealing with the topic. If, after the prayer over the bread and wine, they really are transformed (only, exclusively) into the actual Flesh and Blood of Jesus Christ, then immediately during participation in the Lord's Supper by members of the church, at the moment of tasting, if we can put it this way, the opposite transubstantiation occurs—into bread and wine³³ (which is why they taste accordingly).³⁴ Having admitted this

³⁰ N. D. Uspensky, "Anafora (Opyt istoriko-liturgicheskogo analiza)" [Anafora (Attempt at historical-liturgical analysis)] *Bogoslovskie trudy*, Vol. 13 (Moscow: 1975), 125-147.

³¹ For example, the classical work by Metropolitan Makary, *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* [Orthodox-dogmatic theology], most frequently quoted by domestic theologians, tells about the sacrament of the Eucharist exclusively as transubstantiation or its synonyms, *prelozhenie* and *pretvorenie*. (Met. Makary, *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, 2 vols. [Moscow: Palomnik, 1999 (reprint 1883)], v. II, 367, 385, 396).

³² "Bread does not transmute invisibly, deceptively for the senses into the Body of Christ, but in a Chalcedonian way unites with Him, with God the incarnate Word, communes with Him just as He took upon Himself the human nature of

incarnation" (A. I. Osipov, "Evkharistia i sviashchenstvo" [Eucharist and priesthood] [http://www.sedmitza.ru/index.html?sid=253&did=3971&p_comment=&call_action=print1\(default\)](http://www.sedmitza.ru/index.html?sid=253&did=3971&p_comment=&call_action=print1(default)))

For criticism of this work, see, for example: Archimandrite Rafail (Karelin), "Eshche raz o ereticheskikh zabluzhdeniakh professora MDA, A. I. Osipova" [More on the heretical errors of Professor MDA, A. I. Osipov], <http://theologym.narod.ru/rafael.htm>

³³ It is curious to note that a similar idea is present in the Orthodox *Drevnii paterik* [Ancient patristics], 18.4 (published in 1899). Actually, the church editor comments on it in the context as "an obvious vision from the devil." See <http://www.krotov.info/acts/04/0399ptr6.html>

³⁴ Here we may remember the "transubstantiation" of water into blood by Moses and Aaron in Egypt

point of view, we avoid the well known restraint of Protestant “spiritual” interpretations regarding the ontology of the Lord’s Supper, thereby preserving a Protestant position in its essence: bread remains bread, and wine remains wine.³⁵

The church is the Body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:24), in which Christ Himself is the Head (Col 1:18; Eph 5:23); and we are members (parts) of this living united Body (Ro 12:4-5; 1Co 12:12-27). Christ, stopping Saul on his way to Damascus, says: “Why are you persecuting Me? ...I am Jesus whom you are persecuting...” (Ac 9:4-5). By these words the Savior, abiding in heaven, unmistakably identifies Himself with the Church (Body) suffering on earth. “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1Co 12:26). We see the same thing in communion: all members (parts) of the church, belonging to the living Body of Christ in order not to perish, must necessarily feed on His life-giving essence, on Flesh and Blood, even if they do not

quite understand how this sacrament works. It may even be true that the less they understand, the better; then they will trust the incomprehensible God even more. The profound theologian Ephraim the Syrian (fourth century) once said in humility:

And I, brothers, do not become bold because I can meditate upon the mysteries of the Lord, or even touch these arcane and dreadful mysteries. And if I wanted to be daring and began to muse on them, then I would not be capable of comprehending them... I am mortal, from the dust and of dust, made by grace of earthly essence; voluntarily I understand the nothingness of my being and I do not want to enter into the investigation of my Creator, because the Incomprehensible One is dreadful in His essence.³⁶

It is surprising, but a fact: the thinking of most Russian Baptists is apophatic (even if they are not familiar with the term). This is fully manifested in their confession of God as great, unfathomable, and as the one who cannot be portrayed.³⁷ It is difficult to find as much

(Ex 7:19-21), and water into wine by Christ during the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-10). It is worth noting that neither the blood in Egypt nor the wine in Cana were imaginary, but genuine, tasting (and probably in color, looking) like blood (Ex 7:18.21) and wine (Jn 2:9-10). It is hardly godly after such examples to pose the question of the “expedience” of turning wine into blood, or blood into wine by our Lord.

³⁵ It is quite possible, sparing the feelings of “unbending” Protestants, to go without mentioning transubstantiation. In other words, whoever sees only the bread and the cup of wine during communion partakes of only bread and wine, not completely realizing the sacrament of communing in the Body and Blood of Christ (1Co 10:16). However communion takes place with each sincere Christian anyway; and whoever sees Jesus Himself in the Lord’s Supper, partaking of the same bread and wine, is already consciously communing in His bro-

ken Body and pure Blood poured out for sinners.

³⁶ Ephraim the Syrian, “Protiv issledovatelei estestva Syna Bozhia” [Against researchers of the nature of the Son of God]. <http://www.pagez.ru/lisn/0451.php>

³⁷ The lyrics of hymns 114 and 440 from the collection *Pesn’ vozrozhdeniia* (Gusli 241 and 269), in particular, include the following lines:

“To behold You with our eyes // is not granted to us, sinners, but to embrace by faith // with love we can, although invisible // You give inexpressible // delight to the soul ...”; “Oh, immeasurable love // deed wonderful and holy, // unfathomable goodness // my mind cannot comprehend. // Lamb, offered as a sacrifice! // How can I reward you // for the unspeakable gift?..”

Such apophatic ideas are present in many other hymns of the main worship book of domestic Baptists, see, e.g. numbers 66, 91, 98, 108, 187 and others.

reverence in any other church at Communion, which is not officially called a sacrament at all among Russian Baptists, although it is such in its essence.

To confirm this statement, suffice it to remember the all-congregation Friday fast (with full abstention from food and often from water) before Communion; the personal fast on the morning of the day of the Lord's Supper; the penitential prayers; the minor key congregational singing, frequently accompanied with tears, about the suffering Christ; the crumb of Eucharistic bread, accidentally dropped on the floor and immediately picked up in reverence; the elders and deacons' fear of spilling the precious cup;³⁸ the belief that one must drink deeply from the cup, not just sip from it;³⁹ the most serious attitude of ordinary members of church to the apostolic warning (understood, by the way, quite literally, and not at all allegorically!): "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment on himself... For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number have fallen asleep"(1Co 11:29-30).⁴⁰ Such eloquent details precisely testify to the sacramental nature of domestic Baptist Communion, and not to the traditional "remembrance" of Jesus' sufferings,⁴¹ as is often stated officially. No, not

merely bread on a tray and wine in a cup are what is seen by Russian Baptists!

Undoubtedly, among them there are rationalists, lovers of Western theological books, and textbooks on theology. Still the majority of church members (including a considerable number of presbyters, even contrary to the knowledge they received at Bible schools and seminaries),⁴² under the influence of the general Eastern Orthodox tradition successfully intertwined with fundamental Protestant apophatism, tend to Christian mystical theology, refusing the attempt to comprehend God with their mind. It is for this reason that Russian Baptists so frequently and with especial feeling repeat the following apophatic texts, intuitively chosen from the Scripture:

"Behold, God is exalted, and we *do not know* Him; the number of His years is *unsearchable*"(Job 36:26).

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, *I cannot attain it!*" (Ps. 139: 6)

"Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is *unsearchable*" (Ps. 145:3).

"The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding *no one can fathom* (Isa 40:28).

"For *My thoughts are not your*

³⁸ I remember an old presbyter in a Baptist church in Omsk, who artlessly said to his congregation during the Lord's Supper, "Please be careful, brothers and sisters, not to spill the Blood of Christ!"

³⁹ It is worth noting the following: "The bread and wine are just symbols of Christ's suffering," the young and "literate" Baptist preachers sometimes announce from the pulpit. "Yes, of course," the old men do not contradict it, but at a word they dissolve in tears.

⁴⁰ Regarding illnesses, by the way, it is common to hear something like the following from church ministers: "It still hasn't happened that anyone ever be-

came ill because of taking Communion from the common cup ("they say this is unsanitary"), on the contrary, we often hear about illnesses being healed..." In addition, the traditional domestic Baptist churches do not consider the "holy kiss" after the Lord's Supper allegorically at all, and it is still widely practiced in Russia, reluctantly giving way to the Western practice of the ordinary handclasp.

⁴¹ On this topic see the excellent work by S.V. San-nikov, "Vecheria Gospodnia" [The Lord's Supper], *Almanakh Bogomyslie*, № 1 (1990), 65-116.

⁴² Where, obviously, Western theology, which is not always acceptable to the Russian Baptist brotherhood, prevails.

thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, declares the Lord” (Isa 55:8).

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable* are His judgments and *unfathomable* His ways!” (Ro 11:33).

“Because *the foolishness* of God is wiser than men, and *the weakness* of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were *not many* wise according to the flesh, *not many* mighty, *not many* noble; but God has chosen the *foolish things* of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the *weak things* of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the *base things* of the world and the *despised* God has chosen, *the things that are not*, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that *no man*

may boast before God” (1Co 1:25-29).

“Thanks be to God for His *inde-scribable* gift!” (2Co 9:5).

“To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the *unfathomable* riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8).

“Now to the King eternal, *immortal, invisible*, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1Ti 1:17).

Realizing that many points expressed in the present article can be debated, nevertheless I find it necessary to draw the attention of as many theologians and ministers of local congregations as possible to the given topic for deeper meditation on these well-known features of domestic evangelical spiritual tradition.

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