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THE GARDEN OF LOVE: SOME ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

ABSTRACT

In contemporary cultures, we often observe a strong shift of values. Traditional religious ones are being replaced with “worldly” – at times petty – values. Within this context, notion and understanding of “paradise” takes a central place. Indeed, this is frequently regarded as a consolation for failed ambition on earth, rather than as recognition of true communion with God. In fact, in paradise, human beings existed in a state of harmony with their Creator and the rest of creation, as well as with themselves. Due to the fall, human beings have been deprived of Grace. However, God sent the gift of His Son to recreate cosmic unity through His body, the Church. This article explores the manner in which the Church mysteriously shapes paradise life on earth.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major issues in parts of contemporary society is the conflict among different sets of values. We frequently encounter people that have no patience and are no longer related to actual values, which cannot be separated from God, but, conversely, are attached to petty things, holding no substance, and thus easily crumbled. In this vein, to many, “religion” seems to be a vanished term, destined only for some contemplative natures. It is difficult to model its definition and practice upon consciousnesses marked by the speed of the scientific as well as spatial and super-spatial technological development. They believe the world to be a value by itself and to owe almost nothing at all to any invisible “force”, being governed by scientifically proven laws, but absent is the miracle-maker who brought these natural laws into existence. For them, there is life only here on earth and nothing more. Any posited world beyond this earthly life appears to

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be simply an alleged reality, uncertain by definition, with any difference between heaven and hell sometimes viewed with a dose of pseudo-religious irony.

Within this context, the concept of *paradise* is often used in everyday speech in a very simplistic manner, aiming to describe an imaginary space of pleasures, rather than a construct filled with a profound spiritual significance.¹ How many people think of its full biblical significance when they utter the word *paradise*? Or if they do consider it in this light, how limited is their comprehension of it?

Nevertheless, *paradise exists* for true Christians; it is neither a chimera nor a mere *expression* of an obsolete tradition or backward mysticism. For them, *paradise* is the supreme form of life, the hope in a better world, ruled by peace, love and light; a mirthful space, impossible to depict, accessible only to angels and holy people; in other words, a place of profound encounter with the Creator.

Given this, we can ask ourselves how they could then explain their estrangement from God, despite their affiliated membership (at least in the church membership records) to one church or another? Why is this present world so preoccupied with life on earth? Why are people so interested in their body's well-being and yet so little concerned about the well-being of their soul?

One can suggest a link between ignorance and unbelief, since few appear to ground their faith and feelings on the perfect logic of the Gospel's teaching. This directs us to try to discover, beyond the divine transcendence, the immanence of His presence in each created existence, as part of the whole universe.²

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- 1 If an opinion poll was made among those who declared themselves Christians regarding the exact significance of *heaven*, we would probably be surprised to discover that the term itself is misunderstood. Heaven is often perceived (wrongly) as a form of consolation for those who did not succeed in fulfilling all their wishes in this world. Thus, it cannot be a reality for those who are not aware of the importance of their true professing as adoptive children of our Heavenly Father.
 - 2 It may not be a lack of faith, but rather a self-sufficiency (indolence), which was born at the same time with the "instauration" of a new life-style, incompatible (to a great extent) with traditional European, Christian values. On the one hand, there is a risk in attributing religious feelings to a lack of education (often confused with rural communities); on the other hand, there is a risk of an exaggerated rational analysis from the part of those who want to talk more *about* God and less *with* God. One thing is certain: salvation, the encounter with God, cannot

2. A SHORT EXPLANATION: HUMANITY'S FALL AND ISOLATION

God created the world out of love, in order that it may respond with love. In His divine plan, human beings had a unique role, namely to rule the world and maintain it in relationship with their Creator (Lampe 2003:157). Therefore, human natural gifts are absolutely special, as they synthesise in themselves the whole universe, simultaneously in its spiritual and material dimensions.³ The human being is a *microcosm*, a synthesis of the entire creation, created in the image of God, and having the prospects of likeness to Him.

In *paradise*, human beings found themselves not only in an harmonious relationship with God, their Creator, and with the surrounding nature, but also with themselves, body-spirit, in a tridimensional perspective, according to the perichoretic image of the Holy Trinity. It was an almost perfect state, due neither to human beings,⁴ nor to their inborn strengths, but to the divine grace of God. Grace sustains the order, unity, and harmony of the entire creation, for it alone unites the intelligible, spiritual or transcendent world with the palpable, rational and immanent one. It is God “in motion”, the extension of divinity through His energies in the creation.

Grace is the uncreated divine energy or power which springs from the one being of the three divine persons, unseparated but distinct from it (the

occur in the library, in an armchair, or in front of the TV, but only in the Church. The “intellectualist” type of Christianity is not specific to Eastern Spirituality.

- 3 God created human beings not like all the other speechless creatures, but as an image of His own, sharing the power of His word, for they, like shadows of the Word and rational beings, may remain in happiness, living the true life in *heaven*, that is the life of holy men (Athanasius 1991 [1891]:37).
- 4 By nature, of course, human beings are mortal, since they were made out of nothing (Athanasius 1991 [1891]:38). If they had a wrong choice at the time when they could see God personally, as they were more interested in the material and palpable things (some commentators try to find Eve guilty, as she was deceived by the devil, but the feeling of guilt is common) than the spiritual ones, where spirit and matter did not exclude each other, on the contrary, they formed an harmonious whole, even more so at present, in a desacralised world, in which they are incomparably more vulnerable. The image of paradise may take special forms for contemporary human beings, adapted to the manner in which happiness is currently perceived.

unique being), and which is shared within the Church through the Holy Sacraments, for the salvation of the faithful (Todoran 1964:867-876).

This definition of Grace is an assumed testimony of faith, a theological compendium and, in addition, an elaborate spiritual answer to sceptics' questions regarding *paradise*, salvation, and the recovery of dialogue between contemporary man and God. In *paradise*, human beings had to obey only one commandment which included, in itself, the entire natural ethical law and which, by extrapolation, represented the indispensable condition of the existence of the entire creation through its relationship with God.⁵ Human internal unity, the harmony between body and spirit, is the very image of the internal unity of the *cosmos*. Its most intimate components from the two worlds, sensible and intelligible, apparently irreconcilable, are actually in a perfect conjugation. Never had this relationship been stronger; yet it broke up due to human inconsistency and lack of understanding. In fact, based on their freedom, human beings could choose to love God, their Creator, or to direct their love towards themselves (without God) (Buchiu 1999:17). They chose the second option.

The result has been catastrophic. Human beings have been left *in themselves*, grace has been withdrawn from them, and they are thrown away in a strange world, deprived of its *endurance structure*, a world which is no more a tool, a means to good things, but a burden, a control centre. This fall into sin disfigures human nature; the image of God in human beings grows ugly; its beauty no longer bears the brilliance of the prototype. Darkness *replaces* light and chaos replaces order and harmony (Dumitrașcu 2003:127).

The surrounding world is hostile to human beings, and the prospects are gloomy, resulting in death instead of grace, disintegration instead of likeness to God (Coman 1973:464-465). However, despite the fact that human beings have abandoned their Creator, He does not forget them and sends His only Son as the only *Mediator* between the two existential plans, the One who embraces in a perfect union the uncorrupted divinity and human nature grounded by uncertainties and hopelessness.⁶ Without this gift of his Son, loneliness and isolation would take the communion's place.

5 For the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature and, as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again (Athanasius 1991:38).

6 It should not be understood that the Saviour's human nature was grounded by uncertainties, but that in His human nature the entire manhood is virtually present with the stigma of its impotence and

3. SHAPING PARADISE ON EARTH

Jesus Christ, the incarnated Word of God, is the guarantor of a harmonic re-creation between Creator and creature, of cosmic unity in all its dimensions. All things came into existence through Him; and He Who by His own light illuminates both visible and invisible things, and gives movement to all, keeps them in Himself and gathers them, leaving nothing unfilled by His power, giving them life and guarding each of them and all (Athanasius 1991:26). Therefore, the entire activity of redemption, starting with incarnation, passion, resurrection and ascension, concerns the reconstruction and the return in Himself not only of human beings, but of the entire *cosmos*. More concretely, the restoration of human internal unity and harmony has cosmologic repercussions, by virtue of the person's centredness and superiority within the spatial-temporal structure of universe. There is an indissoluble connection between human beings and nature; therefore, the healing of human beings has automatic repercussions in nature.⁷

From the moment of incarnation, the human nature that Christ has assumed enters in a process of deification, which finalises by regaining the grace lost by our forefathers (Adam and Eve) in Paradise (Eden), through disobedience. The human nature of our Saviour has been spiritualised through the perichoretic interpenetration with His divine nature, and the latter does not suffer any alteration or change;⁸ at His crucifixion, when death was supposed to appear naturally, death became inefficient and inoperative.⁹ Death is defeated in the deified human body of Jesus, its

vulnerability. The position of St. Athanasius the Great regarding the mystery of divine and human intercommunion which, paradoxically, even they seem to be permanently in opposition (especially for those less familiar with the concepts of Christology, or simply sceptical regarding all notions of divinity), they work together for reaching the same final purpose, i.e., the delivery of human nature from the power of destruction, being a voluntary consent of the body to the Word's action (Dumitrașcu 2003:111).

- 7 Popescu (2000:70-73) shows the effects of secularisation on cosmos, society, and human beings themselves, but also the role of the Church in re-establishing normality within creation.
- 8 Athanasius did not understand deification as a transfer of essential properties from divine to human, but as a perfecting process of the latter, who thus becomes the perpetual source for each and every Christian (Dumitrașcu 2003:147)
- 9 Stăniloae shows that Athanasius combines the necessity of deification with the acceptance of death, in order to emphasise the reality of salvation, so that neither one nor the other's importance would

place being taken by the divine grace, and thus, the Christian religion is born (Buchiu 1999:19). *The resurrection of our Lord Christ* thus confirms the birth simultaneously of a new religion, the Christian religion, and of His Church, in an invisible way. After only fifty days, the Church took a visible image, as the first Christian community was established. The Church became the “laboratory of grace”, a place where the sensitive and the intelligible meet each other, the human-divine space in which man encounters God personally. The Church is the place, in which the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Holiness, makes human beings holy (by restoring human possibility to communicate with God, which had been lost by our proto-parents in paradise), and through this gradually transforms them into better images of Christ, in whom the holiness and love of the Holy Trinity is concentrated as in one person. The Church is the human community environment, in which the Spirit actualises Christ’s saving action, the environment in which each of His members finds him-/herself on a different step of ascending, but in the same Christ, Who descended to everybody’s level (Stăniloae 1978:277, 345).

Whereas in the *old paradise*, in the primordial state, *the divine grace* had been given, for free and without having been required, to human beings and the whole world, in the current circumstances, the divine grace is given to each of us in the sacrament of baptism, in the *Church*, with the precise purpose of collaborating with divine grace in a symphonic manner in order to receive salvation.

At the same time, one may say that, due to its sacramental quality, the Church

not only distinguishes herself from the world of sin, but it is involved in the confrontation between the sovereign plan of God and the wilderness of this sick world. The specific act, through which this immersion in, and also delimitation from, the world is done is the Sacrament of Baptism (Bria 1989:325).

Thus, *the Church* represents *the recreation of the paradisiac and graceful world on earth*, the kingdom of God on earth. A *paradoxical* process takes place in the Church (the entire theology is paradoxical,

be diminished. The acceptance of death was necessary in order to emphasise, in an indubitable manner, life’s triumph over it with unconditional divine support, the common nature of the incarnated Word, of the Father and the Holy Spirit. If Christ did not accept death in His body, He would not overcome it for all eternity, and our frail bodies would not become bearers of divine power, able to overcome death in themselves (Stăniloae 1974:279-280; see also Dragas 1991:92-95).

but not illogical). While, on the one hand, we talk about the entering of the newly baptised into Christ (as the Church is His body), on the other, in the Eucharistic sacrament (administered immediately after baptism, within the same ritual), Christ Himself enters into His body. In other words, the communication of gifts outpoured through the grace of the Holy Sacraments does “not only take(s) place in the Church, but forms the very foundation of the Church” (Stăniloae 1939:233).

In paradise, human beings had the opportunity of a direct dialogue with God, without any obstacle; currently, they may communicate with His Son (in His body, the Church) through the Holy Spirit. The entire ecclesial theology is – according to the vision of Stăniloae – a theology of the gift, a theology of the permanent giving, from God to human beings, but also among human beings themselves, to strengthen the internal unity of the Church and to perfect the faithful community in an intercommunicant individuality. In other words, in the Church (meaning not only its actual sacred space, but also the “spiritual state” that every authentic Christian reaches and remains in), the opportunity to mutually share the gifts of its members is fully manifested, namely:

Each gift is called upon by other gifts, for the same Spirit dwells in it, Who keeps inside it the longing to unite with other gifts. Therefore, each person having a certain gift feels that his/her gift is part of the others, because of the Spirit, Who is present in all of them. A more remarkable quality of a Church member is called “gift” not only because it is given by the Holy Spirit, but also because it is meant to serve others, to be transformed into a gift for others. Otherwise, what would humans do with it? They would use it selfishly against others. In this way, the gift could never be fully benefitted from, nor the gifted persons could ever improve themselves. Through one person’s “gift”, the Spirit addresses to others. “The gift” has not only a vertical direction, but also a horizontal and unifying one. Through “the gift”, the Spirit unites one person with another and unites more people between them, for He is the Spirit of all, the Spirit of communion. Thus, the Spirit is present as a unifying hypostasis in the whole Church, which means in each member individually, as he/she remains a member in the Church (Stăniloae 1978:323, 324).

The inner transformation of human beings, the restoration of their inner order, represents a clear image of the restoration of universal order and harmony:

The Church and the world, although sacramentally distinct, form the totality of creation, which is, therefore, a sacred entity ... this continuity between mankind and creation, this link between the

unity of Church and the integrity of creation, achieved through the incarnation of the Word (represents) a “new creation” (Bria 1989:326).

The world finds its destiny again in its interior moral supports, and the presence of God through His energies “rests on it”, as a field of manifestation of the transcendent in the immanent. However, the removal of God from human life is the consequence of a lack of understanding of Christ’s teaching. At present it remains a challenge to society, marked to the point of satiety by technology, secularism, and consumerism, to be fully aware that there is no discrepancy between faith and science, rather a conjugation between them, to the extent that they accept that scientific progress may be understood only through a moral and spiritual progress.¹⁰

The origin of creation is not the fruit of a hazard (coincidence), which science attempts to explain by contradictory theories, but the result of an invisible process, far beyond our power of imagination, because it relies on transcendental plans (Dumitraşcu 2005:255-266). Situated between the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the hypostatic Union and the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Eucharistic bread and wine, Orthodox theology, in all respects, has a perfect logic, accessible to human thinking. Its sensitive coordinates are revealed to mankind through the power of its contingent manifestations, both of them being God’s creation.

Those, for whom the notion of the sacred is alien, find it impossible to comprehend faith “rationally”, for they want to understand what they have to believe in. According to a well-known Orthodox perspective, one cannot encounter God in the library but in the Church. Of course, that encounter with God remains a mysterious event, which depends on each spirit’s availability and not on an exceptional intellectual background. Rather, it depends on an emptying of what is worldly in order to receive

10 One should not go so far as to claim that these two fields are incompatible, because the Holy Fathers have never denied the importance of science to man’s life, provided that all its outcomes should be put in the service of mankind, not in its destruction. No one is contesting the values of great scientific discoveries, of technological progress in the field of computer science, medicine or biochemistry, but they have to serve the common interest (and communitary interest) in compliance with the Christian ethical norms stipulated in all Christian documents of the time. One should not forget that science started to develop within the universities founded by the Church (!). Although science, by its definition, deals only with “observed facts and demonstrated laws”, as it is “quartered” in the sphere of rationality and palpability, theology is rather the dialogue of man with (and about) God, being therefore situated in the sphere of supra-rationality.

inside the One Who transcends the world. God cannot be reached through philosophy, although we may admit that there were a few exceptions, but exceptions do not define a general status quo. Alexandru Paleologu recounts in his book the fact that Berdiaev (although remarkable in expression, rather oscillating dogmatically, and being often placed between Orthodoxy and Catholicism) had stated that he reached faith in God by reading post-Kantian and idealist philosophy, and not the Holy Fathers (Paleologu 2003:103). However, after analysing the role and the place of philosophy within culture from a pragmatic point of view (the classical paths of philosophy remain the ancient ones, that are pagan, and the modern paths are lay and secular), Paleologu was also reminded of the clear and firm answer of a young doctoral student concerning the relationship between philosophy and religion (Philosophy is one thing, and religion another. Philosophy is not faith, but thinking!), making an absolutely charming remark:

Any philosophy is a way out of crisis, any religious faith is an entry into a perpetual and prolific crisis, different from the crisis having a philosophy as solution. ... if philosophy was not faith, but thinking, we would have nothing left to say but: Lord, help my unbelief! (Paleologu 2003:105-106).

Therefore, there is a need for another kind of mission from the part of the Church in the present world, a mission that, despite its *structural conservatism*,¹¹ *she should discover new forms of expression*, so as to be able to convey her message into eternity. Otherwise, one may notice a lower general interest for universal Christian values and an increasingly powerful tendency of people to return to paganism or neo-paganism.

Rediscovering the role the Church should play in people's lives at these times could be a response to the serious crisis facing European culture and civilisation. The Church is not called to sanctify the world in order to dominate it, or to secularise it (to lose the meaning of spiritual values), but to *humanise* personal relations between members of communities everywhere.

11 This is absolutely necessary, as the Church must not follow the trends of society, which change according to the social, political, economic or cultural customs existing at one time, but to offer society the prospects of likeness to the Church herself, because she is the body of Christ, God's image in the world.

4. CONCLUSIONS

One cannot understand these supra-rational truths via rational means. Salvation cannot be obtained by a mathematical analysis of theological axioms and it is thus not necessarily destined for high spirits who want *to understand*, but rather for *the little* (the ordinary people), who want to live the Gospel of Christ.

Alexandru Paleologu tells us, in an unmistakable style, of his meeting with Stăniloae (of whom it cannot be said that he was not an “intellectual of the Church”), a meeting, which removed the “scales” from his eyes. The former “agnostic” (as he thought himself), now close to the “transcendental court”, discovered, in the severity of a gesture, the depth of Christian life that should characterise the true Christian, stating:

An end in September, ten years after the death of a beloved being, the requiem services being past, I went to a specific church, where Father Stăniloae happened to serve in that Sunday. I was impressed and approved the authority, with which he admonished his parishioners, inviting them to listen to the service, with attention to the text. It is not enough to make gestures that are familiar, without any effect on the mind of the soul. I saw, within this severity, an act of awakening and a call to a conscious participation, to an understanding of the real effect of the Liturgy. It is amazing how many Christians are content with external acts of devotion, but they do not change their behavior, in fact only apparently Christian ... Then, Father Stăniloae gave an extraordinary sermon. A sermon about what it means to take your cross and to follow Christ. Until then I did not know what I expected, what I wanted in an obscure and imperious way to learn, to understand. This was. Now, suddenly I understood. I was troubled and thirsty every time I experienced the Liturgy, its staggering and harrowing words. This was the keyword, the shattering and reassuring word. Simple and terrible formula ... One that summarizes everything ... This is the definitive formula. And it is saving. That I understood then: I have taken the scales from my eyes (Paleologu 2003:9-10).

We do not live in an abstract and ideological relationship with God, but we rather assume and confess it; and this confession cannot be proffered without love. In the end, we are born out of love and we must live in it, because love is what gives beauty to this world and ennobles us as children of God. This perfect love is the substance of Paradise, in which God’s love story attains its fulfillment. This Paradise is anticipated and already present in this world by the Spirit acting within and from the Mystery of the Church.

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Keywords

Patristics

Orthodox tradition

Paradise

Rationality and religion

Trefwoorde

Patristiek

Ortodokse tradisie

Paradys

Rasionaliteit en godsdiens