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Bishop Mihail (Mudjugin), The Foundations of Orthodox Teaching on Personal Salvation according to Holy Scripture and the Holy Fathers

This is a summary of a thesis presented for the degree of master of theology¹.

The tendency to liberate Orthodox soteriology from the influence of the scholastics of the Middle Ages was first clearly seen at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century. S. Bulgakov, Antonij Hrapovitskij and Archimandrit Sergij Stragorodskij, the future patriarch, show this tendency. Sergij rejected the legal comprehension of redemption and found that this juridical attitude had its origin from Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. The author finds that Sergij ignored the fact that the legal view of redemption goes back to Ambrosius and Augustine and strictly speaking also to Tertullian and Ireneus of Lyon.

Subjective soteriology, i.e. the teaching on personal salvation, has for the first time been systematically treated in Russian theology by Archimandrit Sergij in his thesis for the degree of master of theology (1895) on “The Orthodox Teaching on Salvation”. Sergij found the legal view in former Russian theology both when it treated the objective and when it treated the subjective salvation. He found the legal view on personal salvation in good works – done because of the fear of eternal punishment or of the hope of eternal reward, instead of for the love of God (the moral aspect). Sergij was silent about some biblical and patristic passages which clearly express the legal view, he declared them to be of a pedagogic nature. The first (polemic) part of his thesis impresses the readers much more than the second (positive) part.

The author almost excludes the polemic element from his own thesis and sees no real antagonism between the egoistic stimuli to fight sin and do good works and the stimulus coming from the love of God and neighbour. He stresses the positive views of Scripture and the Fathers on these egoistic stimuli which really represent Orthodox theology and not only Roman Catholic and Protestant views. He recom-

¹ A typewritten ms. of 548 pp. (Leningrad-Astrahan 1969–1971).

mends the dissertation by Gnedic on “The Dogma of Redemption in Russian Theology from 1892 to 1944”².

Salvation is accomplished by God, but also by man. Man is not only object (of the saving God), but also subject, man must himself accomplish his salvation. Pelagianism of the fourth century excluded the necessity of God’s grace, maintaining that man could be saved through his own efforts. Protestant teaching of the 16th century on predestination removed the soteriological stimulus of a personal Christian life as man’s destiny was predestinated. This teaching on predestination is strange to Orthodox and Roman Catholic spirit and had no real influence among Orthodox and Catholics. Pelagianism was, however, widely extended during the Middle Ages in the West (if not as a theological system, at any rate as theological thought).

Negatively the fear of eternal punishment is a stimulus of moral behaviour and especially of abstaining from bad works. The Gospel speaks more about the eternal punishment of sinners (for example Matt. 5:22, Matt. 8:12 and Luke 16:23) than the other books of the New Testament. The biblical tradition of frightening man with the last judgment in order to make him fight sin and do good works is continued by John Chrysostom and Theodor Studit. The prayers of repentance at the divine services deal more with liberation from eternal pain than with obtaining eternal goods. The passages from Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers do not allow Christians to look upon the possibility of eternal perdition without great seriousness.

Some contemporary Christians stress, however, more what Scripture says about God’s love and forgiveness and are silent about its rigorous warnings. But Scripture looks upon the fear of eternal pain as a natural and normal response to the biblical passages threatening those doing bad works.

Fear is certainly a negative feeling which is harmful for the human organism and activity. But fear of God was in Israel a fundamental feeling which educated their lawgivers and prophets.

Positively the hope of God’s reward is a stimulus of moral behaviour, stressed in the sermon in the mount and by many passages of the Holy Fathers. It is therefore for the Christian consciousness a com-

² A typewritten ms. of 393 pp. (Moscow, Zagorsk. Leningrad, 1953–1962), my summary of this thesis in Diakonia, John XXIII Center, Bronx, New York, 1977, 2, pp. 192–201.

plete legitimate stimulus to do good works and to fight sin. The effectiveness of this method is very often shown during the history of the church. The hope of eternal blessedness is, however, less effective than the fear of punishment. A healthy man usually does not feel much joy because he is in good health, he regards it as a normal situation. In the same way man usually regards blessedness as something quite normal, even if Scripture does not allow man to think like this, but stresses that eternal blessedness quite surpasses earthly joy.

This fear and this hope can be criticized from three points of view.

From an ethical point. The great ancient Christians who really were inspired by this fear and hope nevertheless often felt the moral limitation and even insolvency of this stimulus. Archimandrit Sergij, as formerly mentioned, did the same. It may, however, be called in question if love of oneself is an exclusively negative appearance. Is it not a part of man's nature as of all living beings? Love of oneself has a biological foundation, but it stands often in collision with the love of God and the neighbour.

From an apologetic point. Christians are accused of selfishness. Christian theology must defend Christianity by placing love over fear and hope and shall maintain, quoting the sermon in the mount, that New Testament claims much more than Old Testament.

From a dogmatic point. Christ did not fear eternal punishment and did not hope for reward as he "had the glory before the world was" (John 17:5).

Besides motives of an eschatological character there are motives of fear of punishment here on earth and hope of earthly reward. These last motives are motives of holiness which can be reached during the earthly life and is a foretaste of holiness in heaven. Holiness is the foundation of the kingdom of God, in the visible and the invisible world. Many saints forgot and even disregarded their own eternal life in order to concentrate on the salvation of others. Such a man feels God's love every day. The joy in God is the positive aspect of the status of salvation. The Christian does not ask from what he is saved, he continuously feels God's nearness.

Holiness means living in faith, hope and charity – in communion with God who loves man. Man then resists his love of himself, even if this love ontologically is a part of his nature. Faith connected with love does not only make fear of punishment superfluous, it makes it psychologically impossible. "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 5:18). The loving faith actively reveals itself in good works. Love in connec-

tion with faith and hope is the stable element in the status of salvation, i. e. of holiness.

The rational faith is not sufficient for our salvation, even if this was maintained by the Lutheran “Orthodoxy” (die reine Lehre). The saving, loving faith is, however, unthinkable without this rational element which promotes the fear of God. The fear of punishment is certainly a negative feeling, but it is saving for a sinner as bitter medicine is useful for the sick. This fear is founded not only on man’s love of himself, but also on God’s love of man. It is, however, not the same if man is saved through the fear of eternal perdition or he is saved through the love of God and neighbour.

In Holy Scripture many of the words about the Christians’ relations with the external world seem to be contradictory. They speak both about love of the world and about isolation from and hatred of the external world. It is, however, only possible to gain true love of the world when carnal, biological bindings are mastered. Outside God man is not allowed to love the world (1 John 2:15), but in connection with God – when we live in God – we may and shall love the world.

If sin only calls forth regret and is evaluated only as a mistake, this evaluation has no moral character. Man must acknowledge his responsibility of his sin. On any step of his spiritual development man is able to sin. His ability to resist sin is not due to a momentary revival as the Pietists, the Pentecostal Movement and some Baptists say. The best means of fighting sin is the spiritual life in God which bears the fruits of love: the active good works. It is effective, but not sufficient to practise doing good works. A continuous vigilance is necessary. Forgiveness of sins does not remove the increasing sinful habit, the sinner remains a sinner and is not able to enjoy the eternal blessedness. Forgiveness, legally understood, is criticized by Archimandrit Sergij in his thesis. Holiness is as necessary as forgiveness of sins.

The grace of the objective salvation is the incarnation, life death and resurrection of Christ. This grace comes only from God and is only received through Christ. It is a gift and cannot be deserved. It is also universal and extended on whole humanity. The objective effectiveness of the salvation by Christ is absolute, but the subjective effectiveness of the salvation is limited by man’s free will which can accept or reject salvation. This free will is belonging to the image of God in which man was created. The church is the fundamental centre of the means of grace: the word of God, the prayer and the sacraments used by the Holy Spirit.

As man has a free will he cannot be predestinated to eternal perdition. This would also contradict that God is absolute love. Grace externally acts through God's providence and inwardly influences man's reason, feelings and will, through the Holy Ghost. Augustine, asserting that God acts on man's soul by awaking love and joy, stands nearer to Orthodoxy than Molinism and Thomism. A very important means of grace is the prayer.

Man's spiritual life must continuously grow and develop from a lower level (fear) to a higher level (love of God). It is important to be accustomed and educated to such a development. The fear of loosing the nearness of God is a much higher form of fear than the fear of God's punishment as it is founded on the love of God and not on the love of oneself.

God's love is the universal source of salvation. The subjective salvation in contrast to the objective salvation is not universal as man can reject salvation. The Baptists find it sufficient to be subjectively convinced that they are saved, but this is not founded on Holy Scripture and can weaken man's own Christian activity.

This conviction on personal salvation is, however, a happy feeling, especially at a communion with God in prayer, but it may rather be regarded as one of the fruits in the process of salvation and not as a means to reach salvation.

Ascetic good works as for example fasting and pilgrimage are to be recommended. Many Orthodox regard them as in themselves securing salvation. St. Paul has rejected that salvation is reached as a reward of good works. Faith in itself does not guarantee salvation which is not an external reward neither of works nor of faith. Salvation consists in faith in God, but also in love of him.

There is no real contradiction between God's love and God's justice, the latter being one of the manifestations of his love. God accomplishes not only the objective basis of salvation (the incarnation ... and resurrection of Christ), but also man's subjective realization of the salvation. Man's free will consists in not opposing the saving will of God. God's love creates all conditions of our salvation and produces in us answering love.

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