



Orthodox understanding of the essence of man²

Prawosławne rozumienie istoty człowieka

Key words: God, faith, orthodoxy, essence of man, freedom, meaning of life
Słowa kluczowe: Bóg, wiara, prawosławie, istota człowieka, wolność, sens życia

Abstract

The life of man on earth is framed by two states - the initial state in Paradise and the final state when he attains the Kingdom of Heaven. It is in these two states that the essence of man is revealed in its fullness, but life on earth in between is only an opportunity for the manifestation of this essence through deification, namely, the acquisition of man's unity with God which was lost in the fall into sin. It is through the means of acquiring this unity that the essence of man in his earthly life and the very meaning of man's life are manifested. These ways and means include living in accordance with the commandments, accepting the will of God, acquiring the fear of God, attaining the virtues of faith, hope, love, charity, joy, meekness, repentance, kindness, humility, salvation, etc. Man can manifest and realise these means

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of deification only if he performs them freely; they are the essence of the result of man's will dissolving into the will of God.

Streszczenie

Życie człowieka na ziemi wyznaczają dwa stany – stan początkowy w raju i stan końcowy, kiedy osiągnie on Królestwo Niebieskie. Istota człowieka w tych dwóch stanach objawia się w całej pełni, lecz życie na ziemi jest jedynie okazją do uzewnętrznienia się tej istoty poprzez przebóstwienie, jako nabycie jedności człowieka z Bogiem, utraconej w wyniku upadku (grzech). To właśnie poprzez osiągnięcie tej jedności objawia się istota człowieka w jego ziemskim życiu i sam sens jego życia. Do tych sposobów i środków należą: życie zgodnie z przykazaniami, przyjęcie woli Bożej, bojaźń Boża, osiągnięcie cnót wiary, nadziei, miłości, miłosierdzia, radości, łagodności, pokuty, życzliwości, pokory, zbawienia itp. Człowiek może ukazać i urzeczywistnić te środki przebóstwienia tylko wtedy, gdy je swobodnie wykonuje; są one istotą rezultatu jakim jest „rozpłynięcie się” woli człowieka w woli Boga.

1. Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that the life of modern man and that of entire humankind has taken a bizarre turn. It is dominated by uncertainty and instability. Only an unconcerned optimist does not see, feel, or sense this instability and uncertainty. Uncertainty regarding the future has always been present, dependant on so many factors that only visionaries or adventurers would dare to speak about the future, for one never knew how the “tides would turn”, but the uncertainty of today's existence exceeds all measure. Of course, there is an “elite” leading society in a direction known to it alone, there are theorists and practitioners of social progress, social constructors. But today, social engineering has become silent, almost paralysed. Against this background, many people try to predict the future, but they do it somehow uncertainly.

And this is no coincidence. No matter how much a man tries not to be overwhelmed by the realities of everyday life, no matter how much he is drowned out by the rumblings of momentous events and everyday vanity, he remains a man, and his deepest human essence, his weakened

yet indestructible spirituality tells him that the present time is unique and fraught with something very serious. It would be easy in this state to fall into prostration, to give up a meaningful life, relax and *make the most of life*. But the same spiritual essence of man does not allow many people to do this earnestly: it may happen temporarily, but not permanently. Not everyone ends up falling into anabiosis. What to do?

It is necessary to make one's life meaningful. The meaning must be independent from the *vicissitudes* of life, from momentary events, factors, circumstances. How to find this meaning? One can construct it artificially, focusing on the content of the reality dominating at a given time and on one's personal preferences and interests – there will be at least some sense. But it would be better to rely on the truest, deepest and highest foundation of this meaning – on the essence of man within his relationship with God. This is the ontological, deeply-existential and the only true foundation for the believing person; it will never fail, because it is based on God, and who is greater and truer than Him?

In this context, the question arises about the essence of man - what is it, what does it consist of? There is a wide variety of strategies for living life - some of which are primitive and others quite profound. But, as it becomes clear nearing the end of one's life, there is not a single life strategy that does not lead to disappointment or to unmet expectations, to the recognition – if, of course, one is honest with oneself – that one's life has been lived wrongly. The only solution to the spectrum of these failures is to find the meaning of life in God Himself and His Providence for man. Man must search for the meaning of his life on earth as it derives from God, for it is He who created man in all his fullness, and it is in this fullness that the essence of man is revealed.

2. Research Methodology

The study of the problems of the essence of man, as it is seen and understood by Orthodoxy, is carried out in this article by referring to the texts of Holy Scripture, saint-theological literature and Orthodox

dogmatic theology. The philosophical methods used in the research include: the phenomenological method, which allows us to analyse a certain phenomenon in the context of the spiritual existence of man; the widely-used hermeneutical method, which reveals the intra-religious aspects of the essence of man in its connection with freedom, repentance and other concepts related to the subject; the method of the unity of being and thinking, which ensures the constant retention of the specific content of Orthodox teaching in its connection with the realities of the modern world. We would like to emphasize that these methods are used in their unity, since such a subject of research as the essence of man requires a holistic approach.

3. Preliminary remarks

It is firmly established in Orthodoxy that the essence of man is ontologically linked to God. This is irrespective of how a person may position himself – it may be in any way, he may behave morally or immorally, be a believer or a non-believer, to name but a few. At the same time, a man may believe that his essence lies in his mind, in strength, in health, in longevity, in the possession of power, and humanly speaking it is so. Antiquity put forward the thesis of man as the measure of all things. And many more different views of man have been formed in culture and science. Depending on what a person or society considers the justified meaning of life, the vision of the essence of man is formed. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy unequivocally asserts that the essence of man goes back to his, man's, being in God. The act of creation of man by God has set this essence for all time. "Sacred Scripture says that the creation of man was preceded by a certain «meeting» of the Divine Persons: Let Us make man in Our image and in Our likeness (Gen 1:26)." In Orthodox theology, this *meeting* is called the Pre-Eternal Council. Of course, the word *council* is an anthropomorphism since the will and action of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity are one. However, this emphasises the special place of man in God's plan for the world' (Davydenkov 2019, 7).

The modern Greek theologian Christos Yannaras emphasises in this connection: “The special character of the act of creation of man by God is supplemented, according to the Bible, by another exceptional act: «And the Lord God created man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul»” (Genesis 2:7). No other creature was created by God “by His own hand”. The material for the human body was “the dust of the earth”, hence the name of the first man: Adam (“made of the earth”). But this earthly clay was moulded by the hands of God Himself, who then breathed into it His own breath and thus raised man to the level of “living soul” (Ânnaras 1992, 72).

Human life and its meaning are found in God. Therefore,

Questions about the meaning of life become painfully insoluble for man only to the extent that he is removed from God (Leonov 2016, 5).

And since after the fall of man in Paradise, man must now endeavour to recreate his connection with God and thus be saved, for the meaning of man’s life is precisely salvation. As Nikolai Serbsky writes:

The salvation of the soul is the only meaning of all the labours of man on earth (Nikolaj Serbskij 2014, 52).

In fact, in these theses lies the main content of the problem of the Orthodox vision of the essence of man.

4. The essence of man in Orthodox theology

Posing the question of the essence of man immediately leads us to the creation of man by God and man’s stay in Paradise. Only then did man abide in his essence, coincide with it. The essence of man is to be in unity with God, to fulfil God’s purpose. We can assume that the future stay in the Kingdom of Heaven also returns man to his essence. All the rest of the time between these two states man does not respond to his essence, does not manifest it; but man does foresee his essence, he strives

to find it - in a certain sense, all Christianity is the process of man's return to his essence. The teachings of the Church Fathers, the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils, the lives of the Saints, hermits, martyrs and confessors, asceticism, all the spiritual practices of Orthodoxy are aimed at finding, at restoring the essence of man - to be in union with God.

From the days of John, the Baptist until now the Kingdom of Heaven is taken by force, and those who make an effort lift it up (Mat 11:12)

- this is exactly what we are talking about. We are placed in the period from the fall in paradise to the "end of time", and we are far from the essence of man, from the purpose for which God created us. We do not own our essence, but we are obliged to approach it: all the riches of Orthodoxy help us in this. It is on this "intertemporality", on the possibility of approaching one's essence, about freedom as a necessary condition for the realisation of this possibility, that the article focuses.

The doctrine of man in Orthodoxy differs from secular conceptions of man. Whereas in the latter the human being is the central subject of research, independent, brought to the forefront, Orthodoxy has little interest in the human being per se, as a certain isolated phenomenon: Orthodoxy considers the human being in the light of his obligation to progress towards restoring the lost unity with God, in the process of spiritual transcendence, through the prism of the removal of the old man and the acquisition of the new. Therefore, in all the holy theological literature there is no doctrine of man in his selfhood, but there is a doctrine of man in his movement towards God. This is natural: in Orthodoxy man finds meaning, he finds essence only in connection with God; he is created by God and it is in God that his meaning exists, and outside of this connection, man, by and large, does not exist.

It is often said that man is the crown of creation; he is. God created man at the end of His creation of the world, created him in His own image and likeness, and this is what distinguishes man from all other things created by God.

“Is there a distinction between the image and likeness of God in man, or not? Most of the Fathers and teachers of the Church answered that there is, and said that the image of God is in the very nature of our soul, in its mind, in its freedom, and the likeness - in the proper development and improvement of these forces by man [...]. Consequently, we receive the image of God from God together with being, and the likeness must be acquired by ourselves, having received from God only the possibility to do so” (Makarij 2007, 456-457).

Man received the image of God in God’s act of creation, whereas man must achieve the likeness of God by his own efforts with the favour of God.

Man appears in the following four consecutive states in Orthodox teaching. The first state: bliss in Paradise.

Let Us make man in Our image and after Our likeness, and let him possess the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, (and beasts) and cattle, and all the earth (Gen 1:26).

God

brought Adam into paradise; gave him food, among other fruits of paradise, the fruit of the tree of life; finally, He took a rib from Adam while he slept, and from it He created the first woman, Eve [...] God created man so that he would know God and the universe created by Him, love and glorify Him, and through this he would be eternally blessed... (Makarij 2007, 427).

Man “bathed” in grace and was in such unity with God as is only possible for a created being; man in Paradise was in constant all-round unity with God, both physical and spiritual. This is the first state of man - as he was in Paradise before the fall.

The second condition is the fall into sin and expulsion from Paradise. ‘But because man did not keep the commandment of God in Paradise when he was innocent, but took of the forbidden fruit and tasted of it, he lost his dignity and the state which he had during his innocence. Being cast out of paradise, he became as the Prophet describes him, saying,

“He that hath no understanding in honour, is joined to the cattle that have no understanding, and is made like unto them” (Psalms 48:21); and he heard the sentence: “the earth you are, and into the earth you shall depart” (Gen 3:19) (Mogila nd.).

Meanwhile, even after the fall, man remained man. His purpose and goal is the same - God-communion; the way to this goal is the same - walking in the will of God, to the fulfilment of which he must determine himself according to the feeling of his dependence on God. And yet, of all this, man cannot fulfil any of the requirements by himself. At all points he needs Divine, extraordinary help (Vyšenskij 2005, 64-65).

The third condition: the redemption of man by Jesus Christ by His death on the cross. By His great grace Jesus Christ descended from Heaven, became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, was crucified, redeemed man from sin by His death, rose again, and by His Resurrection opened to man the possibility of gaining the Kingdom of Heaven.

The fourth state (in which man is today): consists in the possibility of man to restore, to recreate his unity with God by righteous living, in the renunciation of sin. It should be emphasised that all four of these states are not only consecutive in time but also correlate in such a way that the subsequent states organically include the previous ones. For example, the present state in which man is, is based both on the Paradise stay, and on the expulsion from Paradise, and on the salvation of man by Jesus Christ. That is, the present state of man cannot be separated from the previous ones, which complicates the realisation of this state, but together sets the path and ways of recreating the lost unity with God.

Thus the doctrine of the Orthodox Church about man as a creation of God is composed, in particular, of the doctrine: 1) of the origin of human nature; 2) of the purpose and innocent state of man; 3) of the self-willed fall and the consequences of the fall of man (Makarij 2007, 427-428).

What can be said about the manifestation of the essence of man in the state he is in today, on earth? Man is far from his essence, but a return to the essence of man is possible; Jesus Christ's demand: “Be

perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mat 5:48) is the guarantee of this, for Jesus Christ would not demand it from one who is incapable of this perfection. Besides, it must be remembered what man is in his essence: God clearly said:

I say, “You are God and the sons of the Most High, all of you. But as men you are dying, and as one from princes you are falling” (Psalm 81:6-7).

The Gospel of John also mentions this concept (John 10:34). This highest naming of man often confuses both believers and theologians; St John Damascene explains this place in such a way that man is a living being [...] because of his attraction to God he becomes a god; however, he becomes a god in the sense of participation in the Divine light, not because he passes into the Divine essence” (Ioann Damaskin, 2011, 177).

In another place in the Psalter, we read:

What is man, that thou remember him? Or the son of man, that thou visit him? Thou hast diminished him with the least of angels and crowned him with glory and honour. And thou hast set thy hand over his works and hast put all things under his feet. The sheep and the oxen all, even the cattle, the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea, the transients of the sea (Ps 8: 5-9).

Man has forgotten that he is God-like, he has resigned himself to his insignificant role, it even satisfies him - he does not have to make efforts, he does not have to grow spiritually, he does not have to fulfil his highest purpose. But it is not so easy for man to throw off the duty of becoming God-like.

We were created for good works, to praise and glorify the Creator and, as much as possible, to imitate God” (Grigorij Bogoslov 2010, 453).

5. Freedom of man as a condition for his reunion with God

It is only a free man who can “imitate God”, and that is why freedom is so important for understanding the essence of man in Orthodoxy. The Gospel of John reveals the essence of freedom on a very deep level which

is not obvious for our contemporary society. The absence of freedom, as well as its loss, is connected here with the sinful state of man.

Then Jesus said to the Jews who believed in Him, "If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, we are Abraham's seed, and have never been slaves to anyone; how then do you say, "You will be made free"? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever, committeth sin is the slave of sin (John 8:31-34).

This is the essence of freedom in Orthodoxy. Sin makes man a slave, and liberation from sin is a return to original freedom. Thus, in Orthodoxy there is an essential connection between freedom in its ontological aspect and freedom in its moral relation. In general, Orthodoxy is highly characterised by the deepest (to the point of interpenetration) interconnection of human being and morality. Morality only in its superficial sense is a norm of behaviour or a requirement of what is proper; it is, in fact and in Orthodox theology, the implementation of the deepest laws of being. Moreover, the relationship is not realised by the unfolding of deterministic inevitability but is realised through the free acceptance of God's Providence for man. Freedom, as a refusal of sin, as its overcoming, is one of the most important moments of the realisation of the truth, which stretches from the possibility of man's being free, preordained in existence, to his conscious liberation from the paralysing effect of sin. Orthodox theology holds that the freedom given to man by God is distorted by man when he commits sinful acts that are not atoned for by repentance.

Whereas freedom was the means of man's God-communion before the fall, after it, man's freedom was significantly deformed by sin when he fell away from God and lost his gracious, permanent, living relationship with God. Yet, Jesus Christ redeemed fallen mankind and restored man's freedom. Now every man is free, but he loses his freedom in his personal sinfulness. "Stand fast in the liberty which Christ has given us (by His death on the cross - A.K.), and be not subject again to a yoke of

bondage” (do not fall into sin, since sin is the source of spiritual bondage –author’s addition) (Galatians 5:1).

Man cannot by his own efforts gain the freedom required to restore unity with God. In the Orthodox teaching on grace as God’s good gift of the possibility of gaining freedom, it is emphasized that an adequate form of acceptance of grace by man is communion with his Divine light, which adores man. But man is only able to perceive these good messages when he is humble and open to them. This inner nature of his deification, which is essential for understanding the essence of man, was revealed in the doctrine of uncreated light by St. John. Maxim the Confessor:

The human mind could not have risen enough to receive God’s illumination if God Himself had not carried it away, illuminating it with His rays (Maksim Ispovednik 1993, 220).

Much later, in the 14th century, St. Gregory Palamas expounded in detail the doctrine of the sacred light in his work “Triads in Defense of Those Who Practice Sacred Quietude” (Grigoriy Palama 1995, 189-210).

A person is free by grace, but he is responsible for himself, that is, he is responsible for his life, for his behaviour, for his thoughts, desires, and aspirations. God judges man according to many criteria, the most important of which are faith, deeds, and intentions. All moral preaching would be inappropriate if man did not possess freedom. After all, only a free man can be required (or recommended) to fulfil moral rules. If man is not free, he is not responsible for his actions. If a man did not have freedom, then it would be impossible to judge a man - because a man would not be guilty, because everything that happens to him happens not by his will, because he is not free and has no power to choose. But man is indeed free, and from his freedom flows responsibility. Now freedom can be used by man both for good (which is given to him with great difficulty) and for evil (to which man has become used).

To freedom you were called, brethren, only that your freedom should not be an occasion to please the flesh, but by love serve one another (Galatians 5:13).

It is difficult for modern man to serve his neighbour with love; he just “pleases the flesh”, and the values of the modern world have little spirituality. Sharing them, man is constantly in vanity, in false aspirations, in much preoccupation, in the ever-expanding circle of needs on which the human soul is caught. Already in the fifth century A.D., St John Chrysostom, one of the universal teachers of the Church, said: “Truly, nothing so makes a man a slave, as a multitude of needs; and nothing so makes free, as contentment with only the necessary (...). Truly, nothing gives the soul so much strength, as freedom from worries, and nothing so much makes it weak, as the burden of worries” (Ioann Zlatoust 2012, 297).

Today, man’s will to do good has weakened, and his sinfulness and evil have increased manifold.

The elders point to the iniquities that are going on in the world, they speak of the main war - the war in our souls and the victory of evil. The victory of evil leads to dehumanisation and a cycle of betrayals: God, the Church, ourselves, one another, family, traditions, spiritual and moral values. Turning away from God, we disfigure our souls and the souls of our children, we stop nurturing the human, the best, the beautiful, we follow the «easy» path of betrayal, deceit, while inevitably slipping and becoming shallow in the spiritual and moral sense. We find it increasingly difficult to refrain from sin, and in our weakness, we legitimise it, make it a norm. What was condemned yesterday is now welcomed and encouraged. This applies both to personal sins and church-wide sins (Pakanič nd.).

Modern man has trampled the meaning of his existence to the point of losing all sense of it. He spends his life in conditions and circumstances imposed on him, in vanity. We must recognise that man has changed his essence of being spiritual being, and therefore man’s attempts to replace or substitute this essence with anything else only expose this substitution. Having renounced his spiritual essence, man can in no way compensate for the spiritual emptiness that has arisen. However, no matter how far he departs from his essence, he remains a human being

in his inner-most being, though crippled by sin, and therefore he will come to the Spirit-created necessity to love God, love his neighbours, and repent. He does not want to and cannot do this of himself, but today it has become obvious to the majority that there is no other way.

6. Conclusion

Understanding the depths of the essence of man is not only of conceptual, ideological, and purely dogmatic interest. This, not discounting the importance of realising the essence of man at the theoretical level, is a practical issue: man, building his life, searching for the meaning of his life, is obliged to correlate it with his essence, it is the essence of man that defines the meaning of life. But it is not easy to resort to this basis: man abided in his essence only in Paradise, and the subsequent life of man on earth is only a faint glimmer of the paradisiacal existence of man. But it is impossible for man to live without meaning; therefore, it is necessary to build this meaning on the present glimmer of Paradise existence, in which man's essence was in its fullness. The meaning of man is found in unity with God, and finding this unity brings us closer to the meaning of human life. The essence of man after the fall into sin is no longer clear and simple; it is now revealed in man's distorted reality through a multitude of relations, connections and definitions, his actions and intentions.

It would seem that modern man is so entangled with sin that it is almost impossible for him to break through to his essence, to become God-like. But God does not confront man with insoluble problems; by bringing man to the necessity of mastering the essential dimensions of his being, God simultaneously gives man the means of such mastery.

God has given man commandments, and it is according to these commandments that man must live. Then God will help man, then man's will will become consonant with the will of God. The commandments are God's laws about the entire world. They are not only moral maxims that are relevant to man and his behaviour; they are the basic laws of the

existence of the world, so the fulfilment of the commandments makes man's life rooted in existence and meaningful. But modern man has despised all the commandments [...] that is why he is in a God-fighting state, in a global crisis [...]. The nature of this crisis is spiritual. One can get out of this crisis only by correcting the spirit. A spiritual crisis requires its spiritual solution. How to get out of this crisis? It is necessary to return to a right attitude with God (Kosičenko 2021, 149).

God is calling man, but His call can be heard only by a man willing to give up fuss, selfishness, and the false values of modernity, instead cultivating humility and love for people.

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