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The Eschatological Concept in the Russian Orthodox Theology Today.

One of the topical issues which has permanently attracted much attention of both theologians and ordinary Christians is the attitude towards eternal sufferings. This issue is very much emphasized in the New Testament. The approach to it in the philosophical and theological works of Russian thinkers is of great interest.

1. The eschatological problem has always been a challenge to the Russian thought. In some periods, it was experienced as an acute feeling of the end of history. In others, the Russian thought focused on one of the most difficult theological problems, the problem of eternal damnation. In the present time again, many church members have taken a heightened interest in discerning the signs of the end of human history, trying to understand in this apocalyptic clue the developments taking place in the world in general and Russia in particular. They are engrossed in the coming of an Antichrist and in counting the number of the beast (Rev.

13:18). However, in its reflection on the eschatological problem, the Russian Orthodox theology has focused today as ever on the Kingdom of God which is within us (Lk. 17:21) and which is to be lived here on earth and in time by every Christian.

If we speak about the eschatological conception as a whole, with all the complex problems it encompasses, it may be said that neither in the past or in the present the Russian theology has managed to produce a study appropriate for such a comprehensive subject (sui generis, "Summa theologiae"). In 1993, though, a collection of works entitled "Russia Before the Second Coming", with the second edition in 1994, made an extended, though not critical enough, attempt at doing it, if only with reference to Russia. At the same time, there is a great deal of studies looking at individual aspects of the problem.

2. The variety of dimensions characteristic of the eschatological problem makes it possible to highlight some them only briefly here.

2.1. As was already mentioned, the most relevant issue in the Russian theology throughout its history has been an ascetic perception of eschaton as the final goal of Christian life and at the same time a source for the right understanding of the whole range of problems involved in human existence. There are several aspects to this issue.

The first is a spiritual and contemplative aspect that concerns the understanding of spiritual life and its laws. Even after the 70 yearlong atheistic captivity, a considerable part of the Russian people are still interested in this aspect, from different perspectives though, while for the Orthodox theology it represents one of the most vital subjects. However, here too, just as with all problems of human life, a positive interest and the right understanding are accompanied with numerous temptations.

One of them is the age-old tendency of human mentality to "pluck off the fruit" instead of acquiring it legitimately through a gradual and laborious process. In this case, the temptation is to substitute religion as observance and spirituality for form and "law". As a result, eschaton, the Kingdom of God, becomes not so much something within us (Lk. 17:21), a state of the human spirit united in Christ with God glorified in the Trinity, as something external and given, even as a "legitimate salary" from God. Naturally, such an understanding

distorts profoundly the fundamental biblical teaching on man as the God-like creature and leads the Christian away from the eschaton he seeks by the make-belief righteousness and "orthodoxy" it generates.

There is another temptation that has hit especially hard a certain section of the intelligentsia who have embraced faith but failed to see the profound specificity of Christianity and its fundamentally new vision of God different from that in other religions. It is a temptation to perceive Christian spirituality as something so broad and comprehensive as it ceases to be life precisely in Christ and turns into something of pan-religious nature, into some theosophical experience of vague and obscure sensual (James 3:15) raptures and mystical states.

The second aspect equally vital today is how Orthodox and Catholic asceticism understands the ways and means of developing eschaton in the heart of an ascetic and the criteria of a truly spiritual state, sanctity, saints and spiritual perfection. At a time when Russia has seen as much Catholic literature, including that on asceticism, as never before, this aspect has excited very many Orthodox believers. Consequently, the public, ecclesiastical and theological awareness has developed two confronting attitudes to the Catholic sanctity. One is traditional and negative, coming from many very influential ascetics of the past and the present, whereas the other sees the Catholic asceticism as having the same sanctity and spiritual achievements as Orthodox, but with its own peculiarities and ways. The lack of attempts to discuss all these problems seriously at bilateral Orthodox-Catholic theological meetings has only aggravated the situation.

The third aspect refers to the vision of eschaton outside church life. This is a major complex issue perceived in a broad variety of ways. It ranges from the affirmation that the entire temporal life is always guided by the Holy Spirit and should be therefore recognized by Christians in all its manifestations to its complete negation as bearing the spirit of the prince of this world (cf Eph. 2:2). At the same time, there is a clear need for an adequate

assessment of all aspects of human activity today, in the first place, politics, economy, science, technology, philosophy, art and culture as a whole. The need has been increasingly voiced to rethink critically the idea of progress and the meaning of history, especially the destiny of Russia and her place in world history.

2.2 The theme of an Antichrist, his name, signs of his emergence and expectations of the end of history have been present in Christianity from the beginning. In Russia, it sometimes became a problem of national significance. In the 15th century, for instance, the Paschal calendar ended in 1492. This year was believed to correspond to the year 7000 since the creation and to conclude its existence. The expectations of an end were as strong in 1666 for the understandable reason of containing three sixes. Naturally, there were no problems either with the candidates to the title of Antichrist. However, *tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis*.

The present-day scientific and technological progress has given this theme some new major impulses, as it becomes increasingly possible technologically to exercise total control over every person and to manipulate his behavior. According to a number of experts involved in the computer industry and the development of computer technologies, it is possible already now to control people en masse. They maintain that the reality of universal computer control over the human population is not far off. In fact, it will come in the period from 2010 to 2020 with computers coming in general usage.

The question of the "three sixes" is also viewed in this perspective. Psychologically, this symbol is impressive for an inexperienced consciousness because of its graphic vividness. Though not at all necessary for computer calculus either technologically or mathematically, this apocalyptic number has attracted a heightened attention also because its presence has already become a reality, for instance in the dash-code of various goods. The

figure 666 is present in any bar- or dash-code of any product. Apparently, it has been done consciously by those who have created this code system. It is one of the most simple and vivid examples of deliberate introduction of the apocalyptic number, the sign of an Antichrist, into everyday life. One can understand then why the question of the total usage of this figure has been raised to a conciliar level of discussion (or condemnation), for instance, in such a considerable part of the Russian Orthodox Church as the Ukrainian Church.

Another stimulus for the development of apocalyptic moods and expectations in today's life has come from the obvious degradation of morality in power structures and the rapidly increasing concentration of political, informational, scientific and technological, economic and military power in the hands of a very narrow circle of world "supermen". Hence comes clearly the idea of one global state to be led by this handful of "gods" with unlimited "computer" power, which will lead to the establishment of universal physical and spiritual slavery of nations and each person. All this is quite consistent with the apocalyptic predictions of the totalitarian regime to be established in the end of history by one universal "leader". (Cf. "and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations" (Rev. 13:7), who will become the "christ-saviour" of humanity (Rev. 13:3-4).

The logical consequences of this new world order in a situation of spiritual, moral, ecological, power, population and other crises that have hit the world today are obvious. Moreover, they again correspond to what is described in the Revelation of St. John the Theologian as the ultimate terrible death of the globe. On the basis of this and many other signs, a growing number of voices have spoken about a rapidly approaching conclusion of this kind.

3. Among the problems which attracted close attention in old times and challenged many Russian theologians and religious thinkers in the 20th century is the understanding of what Father Paul Florensky described as "the antinomy of Gehenna".

The starting point from which Russian theologians and philosophers approached this question is excellently expressed by Archpriest Sergius Bulgakov. He wrote,

There are two types of the eschatological thinking: the criminal code with all its ferocity and the generous amnesty which is in fact an attempt to avoid all the difficulties of the problem. The first way has become increasingly unacceptable in our days, for it has lost its inner convincingness, while the second represents not an overcoming but a mere 'negation of the first (not mentioning its serious biblical and theological difficulties). In the face of the two types - the medieval orthodoxy and humanitarian universalism - the question arises whether a different, third, way can be found, combining the advantages of both and freeing itself of the weakness of either.

3.1 Let us consider some versions of this "third way". In his well-known study "the Pillar and Consolidation of the Truth", Father Paul **Florensky** (d. 1937), professor at the Moscow Theological Academy, develops the following ideas of "Gehenna". But let us first cite his approach to the problem, as it may serve as a preamble to the statement of other thinkers' views as all.

Awareness stems from the idea of God as Love. Love cannot create in order to ruin or to build, knowing about the destruction. Love cannot but forgive... From the perspective of eternity, all is forgiven, all is forgotten because "God will be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). In short, the impossibility of universal salvation is impossible. This is so from the height of the idea of God. But... proceeding not from God's love of the creature, but from the creature's love of God, the same awareness comes to a directly opposite conclusion. Now awareness cannot admit of salvation without the reciprocal love for God. Since it is impossible to admit either that God forces the creature to love, awareness comes to the inevitable conclusion that God's love may stay without the reciprocal love of the creature. That is to say, the impossibility of universal salvation is

possible. The thesis that the impossibility of universal salvation is possible and the antithesis that the impossibility of universal salvation is possible are clearly antinomic... The negation of the antithesis also negates the thesis, while the affirmation of the antithesis also affirms the thesis, and vice versa. The thesis and the antithesis are inseparable. There is and can be no solution to this antinomy within reason. The solution lies only in the actual transformation of reality itself... (pp. 208-211).

Father Florensky's attempt to find a (rational!) solution of this antinomy boils down to the following:

Personality as created by God, which means holy and certainly precious in its inner core, has the free and creative will manifested in the system of actions. That is to say, it has an empirical character. Personality in this sense of the word is character. But God's creature is personality and it should be saved, but it is the evil character that prevents the creature from being saved. From this it clearly follows that salvation postulates the division of personality and character, setting them apart. A whole should become diverse (p.212).

Personality as God's creation and image, Father Florensky writes, cannot perish in any case. "The character", however, or the empirical personality (evil identity, "the empty skin of personality", guise) of a human being unworthy of its "image" in its work is cast out from the "noumenal personality" into outer darkness (Mt. 8:12). Turning to the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians (Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet, so as by fire.- 1 Cor. 3:13-15). Father Florensky comes to this conclusion:

The work of every one will be tested by fire in which all the impure and foul things will be burned as gold and silver are refined by fire (cf. Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:203) and in which the worthless empirical personality will be separated from the God-created "image of God"... This fire is not punishment, not retribution, but the necessary trial. If the inner image of God has not revealed itself in the concrete likeness of God, then the image of God is taken away from its undeified identity. If the identity is transformed in the likeness of God, then the person receives a "reward", which is the inner bliss of seeing the likeness of God in oneself, the joy of an artist contemplating his creation (p. 230).

Father Florensky believes that it is in Scriptures that he found this idea of "cutting" a person into two "personalities". From this point of view, he analyzed a great deal of passages, including Mt. 5:29-30; Mt. 24:51; Lk. 12:46; Mt. 25:14-30; Mk. 9:43-49; Heb. 4:12, etc.

Thus, a person "himself" will be saved, while his "work" will be burnt.

The "work" of a person, his (evil) self-awareness, separated from the person "himself", will become a mere imagination... a nightmare without the one who sees this dream (p.233-234). Therefore, only the dreams of shadows and the dark shadows of dreams stir in Gehenna (p. 247).

This is the way in which Father Florensky solves the antinomy of Gehenna. Yet, Ms idea of the dichotomy of personality has not found many supporters.

3.2 Professor **B. I. Ekzepliarsky** of the Kiev Theological Academy, believes that it is equally impossible to accept either the idea of apokatastasis or the teaching on eternal damnation. This brings him to conclude that the Divine Revelation is incomplete concerning this question. From Ms point of view, this incompleteness can be explained either by the impossibility for man to perceive the truth rationally or the undesirability for him to have premature knowledge.

3.3 Father **Anatoly Zhurakovsky** (d. 1939) does not accept the possibility for the righteous to enjoy bliss in the face of torment experienced by their fathers and mothers and

maintains that Christian love does not turn away from evil persons, but as much as feels profound pity for them (see, for example, St. Isaac the Syrian on "the compassionate heart" in Homily 48). He believes that the traditional understanding of eternal damnation as endless should be resolutely rejected and develops the following interesting idea.

Firstly, he analyzes the notion of eternity and argues that along with eternity filled with ... eternity as eternal life, it is possible for us to think of a different eternity... as absolute emptiness and absolute non-existence.

This idea, at the first glance, seems to run counter the idea of God's omnipresence. However, Father Zhurakovsky says, it does not. Without being pantheistic, we draw a distinction between God's presence in heaven, in the Eucharist, in church, on the one hand, and on the earth, at a market place, amidst a criminal gathering, on the other

We confess that God is present everywhere, but not everywhere in the same way. He dwells in the church not in the same way as He does at a market place.

That is to say, the intensity of God's presence in different "places" can be considerably different, and this difference is conditioned by the state of a person's spirit, by his freedom.

Therefore, there must be a realm in which God is absolutely inactive, absolutely passive. Moreover, the recognition of human freedom necessitates the recognition that such a realm of God's absolute passivity does exist... Certainly, we mean here ... a purely spiritual realm, a pure spiritual world. This realm of God's passivity represents that same "bad eternity", the eternity of emptiness or non-existence. Christianity recognizes the existence of such a realm outside God.

This realm is darkness (see, for instance, Mt. 25:30). Therefore, if eternal life is perceived as blissfulness, then eternal darkness is perceived as suffering and torment. Human beings come in touch with these two eternities already here, on earth, though their experience will become complete only after the Last Judgement. Father Zhurakovsky writes:

Now we come to the most essential question of our work. If eternal damnation or eternal darkness, which is the same, is believed to be a special realm or a purely spiritual

"plane", which the condemned will enter after the final Judgement, then the question arises: Is it necessary that we should think of this stay of sinners in "pitch darkness" as infinite? Certainly, we perceive torment as eternal in its essence... Torment is eternal by nature... Those who enter the "outer darkness" suffer eternally in the sense that they absorb eternity, coming out of the order of time into the order of eternity and entering from the order of existence into the order of non-existence. But the question arises here: Is it possible to come back from this eternity; can one's eternal damnation turn out finite?

It seems from the first glance that we fall here into a glaring contradiction. How is it possible to speak of the eternal which is at the same time finite? Certainly, we cannot think of a transition or a moment in time as belonging to the ontological essence of eternity... No transition is thinkable within eternity, but our transition into eternity and departure from it are actually thinkable. It is impossible to speak of an end of eternity because eternity has no origin or end, but it is the revelation of eternity to us that has an origin and end.

"The eternal" has its origin and end as a manifestation to the world. We can enter eternity and leave it, just as St. Paul was caught up to the third heaven, to eternity (2 Cor. 12:2-4), and came back. In the same way, "the outer darkness" is eternal by nature, but not unlimited with regard to one's stay in it. Father Zhurakovsky puts this question:

Does this assumption not bring a special harmony into the understanding of the Gospel's teaching? Does it not picture for us God as love to the end? Sinners will enter eternal

damnation and absorb it by their entire being, but will not suffer forever. An hour will come when they will come out of the torment, from the realm of non-existence. Thus, eternal damnation does exist, but its existence does not exclude a possibility for universal salvation.

It is because hell has the meaning of a "purifying and transient moment in the development of a person". Suggestions to this effect are scattered throughout the Gospel. (See, for instance, Mt. 5:25-26; Mt. 18:14, 34-35; Mk. 9:49; Jn. 17:1-2). This conclusion reached by Father Zhurakovsky is correspondent in a remarkable way with the ideas of Isaac the Syrian who

wrote almost 1300 years before him:

He (God) does nothing for the sake of retribution, but looks at the benefit that should come from His actions. One of them is Gehenna... The merciful Master did not create rational beings whom He knew before their creation, what they will be (after the creation) and whom He (still) created to subject them unmercifully to endless sorrow . Let us be careful in our souls, my beloved ones, and understand that though Gehenna is subject to limitations, the taste of being in it is very awful, and the degree of suffering in it is beyond our comprehension .

3.4 We find a completely different approach to the question of Gehenna in the works of another Russian thinker, Prince **Eugene Trubetskoy** (d. 1920). The major ideas of this conception boil down to the following:

Hell is not an some eternal life outside Christ, for eternal life is one: it can be only in God, only in Christ. The reality of hell arises not through the alienation of some living creature from the eternal divine fullness... The falling of hell away from God is the falling away of death, not the falling away of life... Both worm and fire in hell are nothing more or less than images of undying death... This reality of death is not the reality of life, but the reality of ghost. Hell is a realm of ghosts, and it is only as such that it can contain eternity as its part. All eternal life is in God... The reality of hell is the reality of eternal mirage exposed by God's righteous judgement... The infernal agony is suffering caused by the complete and final loss of life (pp. 93-94).

A complete and final loss of life is a transition in time from life to death, and as transition it can be only momentary. Eternal damnation is nothing but a perpetrated moment of final rupture from life. But through his free self-determination, a creature is separated forever from the very source of life and experiences an extreme and boundless torment in this separation... Clearly, the suffering of "the second death" cannot be either an experience lasting in time or a state of eternal life... This suffering ... can fill only one moment - an instant that finishes time for it. But in this moment, the spiritual image of a creature experiencing it is asserted forever: it is assigned for death forever ... In other words, the reality of hell is the reality of transition accomplished forever -the transition from life to death, from existence to non-existence (p. 95).

This is what "the resurrection of the judgement" means: a condemned person is raised from the dead not to live eternally in Christ, but only to come alive for one moment when life is finally and irrevocably separated from its very source. In this sense, as I said, the eternity of hell is the eternity of a moment. (p. 97).

Given all the originality of this theory by Trubetskoy, it leaves an impression of being somewhat incomplete.

3.5 Professor **A. Tuberosky** (d. 1937) of the Moscow Theological Academy suggests the so-called conception of anastasis which in its conclusions is very close to the point of view of Father Zhurakovsky. He writes about the Resurrection of Christ:

It is a fundamentally new, dynamically ultimate revelation of God, similar to the Creation and the Incarnation. Its meaning lies in... the glorification of creation or in the comprehensive spiritual and physical, internal and external, deification (p. 331). The

Resurrection of Christ is a fundamental act of the glorification of creation, parallel to the deification of the world. I see its meaning in the filling of the created nonentity with divine glory (p. 351). As a result of this, "the last enemy, death, will be abolished" and "God will be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). That is to say, He will//// with Himself all the things not statically, for He is present in all things even without it, but dynamically. He will fill them with power or glory, as the new Revelation implies (p. 352).

The kingdom of glory will come as an universal status of existence opposite to the kingdoms of grace and nature. The eternal divine life will be revealed, full of love and every perfection - the life of deified and glorified humanity in the deified and glorified world (p. 352).

The apokatastasis, however, in the absolute, Origen's, sense condemned by the Church is out of the question... Therefore, the Orthodox mystical ideology of the Paschal dogma... the notion of apokatastasis in a certain cosmological and sotenological sense it acquired, should be replaced by the formula of anastasis. It does not mean the restoration of a lost state, but the acquisition by the creature of an essentially new modus of existence by virtue of the Resurrection of Christ (p. 353). Indeed, the bodies of sinners, non-Christians, etc., after the resurrection will also be spiritual, incorruptible, powerful and therefore glorious...

As far as hell and paradise, eternal bliss and eternal damnation are concerned, these actual contrasts, just as their differences in degree, lie on the same dynamic plane. Both evil and good spirits realize the potential of the same free existence, in the sense though diametrically opposite to the goodness of this revelation. In the same way, people may have different, even contrasting attitudes to the divine life revealed in Christ. While some who are believers become the children of God, others who are non-believers become the children of devil... But if existence in general and spiritual existence in particular is a revelation of the good power of God despite evil and suffering, if the divine life turns out to be a gift of the highest possible value, then the highest revelation of God's love in the status of glory cannot be abolished by "eternal damnation".

Therefore, given the actual contrast, anastasis represents the highest value... The Resurrection of Christ as the fundamental anastasis of creation is the revelation of the status of glory realized subjectively in the eternal bliss of paradise for some and the eternal damnation for others. But objectively it expresses the divine good power, which is love (pp. 354-355). The entire creation will be filled with power, spirituality and beauty. Hell and paradise lie on the same dynamic plane, and it is impossible to abolish hell without abolishing paradise. Anastasis is the highest value, and its realization is determined subjectively in a different way for each one, ranging from hell to paradise (pp. 335-337).

3.6 In his comprehensive work entitled "The Bride of the Lamb", Archpriest **Sergius Bulgakov** (d. 1944) offers a very detailed conception of Gehenna concordant with the views of Tuberosky. Just as Tuberosky, Bulgakov does not doubt that;

only one thing cannot be allowed: that the image of glory should be fully absorbed by the image of infernal humiliation (p. 507). To sum up, the basic antinomic postulate is that the eternal life of incorruption and glory can be combined with eternal death and perish as both, though in a different degree, are part of existence (p. 508). ve

Moreover, for those in Gehenna,

this turning to God penetrating the whole life with divine light is that eternity or eternal life to which the eschatological texts refer (p. 501).

Bulgakov's understanding of hell and its eternity, however, is essentially different from that of other Russian thinkers. He writes:

Since hell is not of God's creation but a fruit of the self-determination of the prince of this world and his captives, it has no existence in itself for this very reason. Therefore, it has no eternity of its own. Eternity for it is only a temporal state of life. By virtue of these

ontological considerations, it is necessary to negate the infinity of hell, which dissolves through ages into nothing as its true basis (p. 521).

Bulgakov's treatment of freedom is also original and fundamentally different from that of Berdyaev:

Freedom is relative... Therefore, it cannot be self-sufficing in the struggle with God, both human and satanic. It rises and falls; it is overcome and surpassed in the way of created life towards its deification. Freedom is not an independent power in itself; it is weakness in its opposition to Divinity (p. 521-522).

Bulgakov's affirmation of the relative nature of freedom leads logically and naturally to a different understanding of the Gehenna torment, also very reminiscent of the teaching of St. Isaac the Syrian. He writes:

Evil should not be identified with suffering, which is not evil in itself, but can be both good and evil. From this follows the conclusion that is highly important for the entire eschatology (p. 522). Eternal damnation should be also understood in the spirit of synergism, not only as a passive unduring, but also as an actual creative effort of the spirit which does not lose it even in hell (like the rich man from the Gospel) (p. 523).

"Eternal damnation" is experienced in created temporality. It is essentially not only "punishment", since it is ontologically an immanent consequence of sin, but essentially it also continued life and therefore the riddance of what can and must be got rid of (p. 524). To sum up, the life of the age to come ... does not only represent an uncertain duration of time, but also includes various periods and cycles, "ages", marked by growth in life (p. 528).

Clearly, the perpetual division of humanity into the elected and the outcasts does not represent the ultimate meaning of the universe (p. 533). Satanism is exhaustible; it itself finds an end for itself. Driven away from the world as the kingdom of existence, it returns to a new self-awareness by the power of its will, but this return is already a beginning of the end of Satanism... It is also a beginning of life on the way towards the ultimate restoration and resurrection from the eternal spiritual death (p. 545).

Such are the most important and interesting points of view on the problem of eternal damnation, held by Russian thinkers of the 20th century, which actually belongs to the other, pre-Revolutionary, world. Their ideas are not only studied with willingness today, but are rethought. Thus, recently the Chair of Basic Theology of the Moscow Theological Academy has offered another way of solving the aporia of Gehenna. It can be expressed briefly as follows. In creating the rational and free being, God ordained him for the existence which is described in human terms as happiness. But what is it subjectively for such a being? Socrates gave an excellent answer to this question: happiness is the achievement of what a person believes to be good for him.

But if the good is subjective for every person and directly linked with his qualities, then for a "V being with Satanic qualities, the good can lie found only in being outside God, that is, in the fire of his own passions, in outer darkness, in hell, in Gehenna. In this case, the goodness of God can lie in the fact that He, manifesting His final kenosis, preserves intact the freedom the infernal being and his desire to be where he wills, that is, eternally outside God. As Sergius Bulgakov wrote, "eternal damnation stems from the lack of desire of truth, which has already become a law of life" (Свет невечерний, pp. 413-414). St. John Chrysostom said in this regard: "He (God) has prepared Gehenna precisely because He is good".