



## **Lecture delivered by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk at Uppsala University**

*On 14 May 2014, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, chairman of the Synodal Biblical and Theological Commission and rector of the Ss Cyril and Methodius Theological Institute for Post-Graduate Studies, delivered a lecture at the Faculty of Theology of the Uppsala University, Sweden.*

### **The Church Tradition and Scientific Theology**

*"To think free is great; but to think right is greater"*

*Thomas Thorild*

With these words of the famous Swedish poet and philosopher, I would like to begin my presentation which contains in its title two antithetical concepts.

Today we are forced to separate Church Tradition from scientific theology. Before contrasting and comparing these two unequal spheres, it is essential to note that this situation was not originally part of the theological experience of Christianity. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Tradition and theological, academic science, no matter how it may seem to us today - is a sad and mistaken thing. An unprejudiced study of the causes of this artificial juxtaposition allows us to hope that the theological science of the future may pursue the path of the removal of the contradictions that have accumulated.

Within the framework of this presentation I shall try to outline three topics.

First, and this is important to state, there is a conflict of two ways of viewing the world, one of which is determined by the Church's Tradition, the other by scientific theology. This conflict occurs in both the West and in Russia where till the present the worldview of many people is based on Church Tradition. These people often reject the conclusions of contemporary scientific theology, believing them to be unacceptable and mistaken. In their turn those who hold to academic scientific theological knowledge often reject the most important elements of Sacred Tradition. The notion of Tradition being not obligatory as such, the 'demythologization' of Christianity, various doubts in the authenticity of sources, upon which the Church's theology is built - all of this goes against Church Tradition, while the bearers of

Tradition undermine trust in scientific theology and research work. The gulf that has arisen between spiritual experience and academic knowledge appears to be so deep precisely because we are dealing with two principally different ways of viewing life.

The second part of my presentation deals with the notion of the Holy Tradition of the Church. Here I would like to speak about what Orthodox theology sees as a living source, the constantly active foundation of Tradition, which is the Church's liturgical life and the Christian experience of prayer. Within the context of the liturgical experience there will be an attempt to formulate the concept of 'theology', or rather, to remind one of what this concept was and is perceived to be by the living Tradition of the Church.

Thirdly, the concluding part of my presentation will deal with academic theology. The problem of the interrelation between Tradition and contemporary scientific methods will be examined not in the context of the well-known dilemma of 'Athens or Jerusalem', which juxtaposes the conclusions of scholarship with Church Tradition. There is a point in researching not so much what we today is academic scholarship, but what it should be or could be. Ultimately, this will help us with greater clarity to delineate the way along which, I hope, scientific theology will develop in the twenty-first century.

## **1. Divine Revelation as a worldview**

The world of the Church's Holy Tradition is first of all a unique and universal worldview. In the history of European civilization it swept away the mythological and philosophical cosmology of the Hellenist period. Chronologically this transition coincides with the age of the Christian apologists and reaches its culmination with the creation of a Christian civilization entering history under the name of Byzantium.

The centuries-old history of the Eastern Roman Empire was a time when the worldview based on the Church's Tradition was dominant, and there was no serious confrontation with science and scientific theology. A clear example is the synthesis of Tradition and science is the work of St. Basil the Great who combined absolute fidelity to the Church and her Tradition with a refined Hellenist education. A bishop of the Church, he received his education in the Academy of Athens. In his sermons and scientific-theological tracts he opened up various aspects of Church Tradition, at the same time appealing to the scholarship of Antiquity. Aside from a whole series of fundamental works on theological, exegetical and moral topics, St. Basil is believed to be the author of a liturgy which to this day is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on particularly festive days. The anaphora of this liturgy is a compilation of the fundamental dogmas of the Church, set out clearly and consistently, in both the Creed and refracted through the liturgical experience of the Church.

Another similar example is John Damascene - an outstanding theologian and hymnographer, the ideal

image of an Orthodox scholar. Like St. Basil the Great, he wrote not only theological works but also liturgical hymns which to this day form the basis of the daily cycle of worship in the Orthodox Church.

What was the worldview that these church fathers bore? An obvious answer would be the picture as presented by St. Basil the Great in the *Hexaemeron* (Six Days of Creation). Here the world as God's creation is presented as a harmonic whole. An integral and profound anthropology is inextricably linked to his teaching on the cosmos. We find an analogous picture of the world in St. John Damascene in his tract *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*: here we are also dealing with a harmonic universe as God's creation and the human person as an integral part of the world, the crown of creation.

The destiny of the divinely created world and human person in the perception of the church fathers is forever linked to God and Divine Providence. This is highlighted in Orthodox worship: the prayers and hymns composed by the fathers of Church bear the imprint of their philosophy. The words and images in which this philosophy is captured come from the books of the Old Testament, in particular from the psalms and, of course, from the New Testament, being embodied in precise formulations of such liturgical texts as the Nicene Creed and the anaphora of Basil the Great. The theological commentary to the Creed is in essence the beginning of the science which we today call 'systematic' or 'dogmatic' theology.

We may describe in brief the patristic or liturgical picture of the world thus: God, being beyond all things, created matter from nothing and through the act of his divine will brought forth matter from chaos (disorder) into the state of the cosmos (order, beauty). The divine order, through the mystical world of the ranks of angels, extends to the material world. Divine grace, through the heavenly hierarchy and through the hierarchy of the Church in a single Liturgy of doxology, acts throughout the universe as the binding and structuring principle. From this element of order and source of becoming there arose the models of ordering society. Thus states and whole civilizations are formed.

The demons, the 'evil spirits of the underworld', along with people under the influence of these spirits, were opposed until a certain time to the divine order. Set against God and his order, the action of the devil sows chaos, anarchy, sin and death. Yet the Saviour, the Son of God, God who became a human person, came to people and redeemed the human person from the power of the devil through his suffering and death, with his death he vanquished death and opened up to humanity the way to salvation.

It is precisely this perception of history - as a single inextricably unfolding process, the mover of which is God - lies at the basis of the liturgical texts such as the anaphora of St. Basil the Great. The text of the anaphora replicates, in places almost word for word, the following text belonging to the pen of the saint:

'God created the human person according to the divine image and likeness, imparting knowledge of himself, embellishing him above all animals with the gift of speech, granting him to enjoy the boundless beauty of Paradise and placing him as ruler over all that was on the earth. And after he was beguiled by the serpent and fell into sin, and through sin was visited by death and all that is worthy of death, he did not despise him but sent at first as a help the law for his preservation and placed over him the angels for his care for the exposure of sin and the teaching of virtue, he sent the prophets, who through their righteous anger halted tendencies towards evil and exhorted him to good deeds through his promises.

He repeatedly before various people as an example to others showed the end of sin and did not turn away from those who by various means remained disobedient, for the Master has not abandoned us with his goodness and his love has not ceased for us... yet we have been called forth from death and again given life through Jesus Christ, whose beneficence is ever more amazing.

For, in being the divine image, he thought it not robbery to be equal to God but humbled himself, taking upon himself the image of a servant (Phil. 2: 6-7), assumed our infirmities, bore our illnesses and was wounded for us so that by his wounds we may be healed (Is. 53: 5), endured the most shameful of deaths so that we may be raised to a life of glory and, being not content with this alone, he gave us - the dead - life, and even granted to us the dignity of divinity and eternal rest...'

This picture of the world is based not on knowledge from books. This worldview arose in the hearts of people who set out on the path of faith and lived the liturgical life of the Church. It is completely free from being anti-science, if of course we do not believe that the notion that God exists and that he is the Creator of the world is anti-scientific. The value of this worldview is that it gives not a fragmentary but whole knowledge of God, the world and the place of the human person in this world, and the meaning of his existence.

Let me note that in classic Byzantine Christian theology we do not find any mythological (now perceived as caricatured) depictions of the world - for example, such as an upturned sphere resting on a gigantic turtle or three whales. These images have a completely different origin, although many contemporary scholars such as Stephen Hawking refer to such myths as an example of the Church's 'backwardness'.

The books of Basil the Great and other church fathers were studied in the schools of Byzantium, including the university of Constantinople, where future statesmen of the empire, military leaders and church hierarchs received their education. Of course, Byzantium had its free-thinkers such as John Italus, there were whole heretical movements, but there was no methodological and principal contradiction between theological science and the Christian worldview.

This contradiction arose in modern times and was connected mainly with the divorce of theological

science from the tradition of the Church whose vivifying juices sustained her. Like a branch cut off from the trunk of a tree, theological science, especially in the Protestant sphere, began to lead a life of its own. The rejection of Church Tradition as the norm upon which the Christian life is built has become the moving force in the development of Protestantism which proclaimed the very dubious and shaky principle of *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone) as the criterion of theological truth. Yet it is impossible to understand Scripture outside of Tradition, and the rejection of Tradition almost automatically leads to the arbitrary interpretation of Scripture. In its extreme expression it leads to the so called 'demythologization' of Christianity when even Scripture ceases to be authoritative, while each scholar believes his own opinion to be the main criterion of truth.

The deep spiritual crisis in which Protestantism finds itself in modern times has made the most serious impact upon the methodology of scholarship in general and on theological scholarship in particular. By way of illustration of this spiritual crisis we may quote from Rudolf Bultmann's article 'The New Testament and Mythology':

'Man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anybody to seriously hold the New Testament view of the world - in fact, there is no one who does. What meaning, for instance, can we attach to such phrases in the Creed as "descended into hell" or "ascended into heaven"? We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted.'

Orthodox theology has remained absolutely free from the crisis that is so evident in Bultmann's theology. For Orthodox theology there is no contradiction in not sharing the view of the three-storied universe, not believing in the notion that the earth rests on three whales, and yet at the same time believing that Christ descended into hell and ascended into heaven.

This faith that flows from the New Testament view of the world rejected by Bultmann and his like is in full measure reflected in the worship of the Orthodox Church where to Christ's descent into hell one of the main liturgical days of the year is dedicated, Great and Holy Saturday. In the liturgy for this day Christ's descent into hell is interpreted as one of the most important events in the history of salvation which began with the creation of the world and the human person and continued in the incarnation of the Son of God. In feeling themselves to be part of this history, millions of Orthodox Christians throughout the world believe that Christ came in the flesh, without seeing in this any contradiction with the progress of science and technology which belongs to a completely different dimension and in no way affects the foundation of belief.

It is my deep conviction that between the dogmas of the Christian faith and the scientific worldview there is no principle contradiction. It does not exist between the Church's teaching and academic theology, as

has been proved by the two-thousand-year history of Orthodox theology. The conflict of worldviews that has arose in modern times between the New Testament view of the world reflected in the Church's Tradition and individual representatives of academic scholarship came about as a result of the personal spiritual crisis of these theologians who imagined that their own reasoning mind, with the so called 'achievements of science and technology', was sufficient to debunk the worldview which was developed by theological science within the bosom of the Church and in the course of Church Tradition.

Here, within the walls of Uppsala University, I cannot but mention how the connection between Church Tradition and theological scholarship has had an impact on the development of church life in itself. It is no secret that a few years ago the Russian Orthodox Church took the difficult decision of suspending all contacts with the Church of Sweden. The reason was the introduction in the Church of Sweden of a rite of blessing for so called 'same-sex marriages'. For us this decision was the line beyond which dialogue becomes meaningless, for we took this decision to be a rejection of the moral norm clearly and unambiguously reflected in Church Tradition and Holy Scripture.

There was a time when Protestant ideologues proclaimed Scripture as the sole criterion of ecclesiastical truth. Yet many modern-day Protestants, especially in the West and North, believe it completely acceptable to review the norms contained in Scripture in deference to the liberal standards and rules of political correctness. Within the realm of morality there are also its own 'achievements of science and technology': if we are to place them higher than the teaching of Christ and the apostles, then we shall have to correct not only Tradition but also Scripture itself.

I would like to say openly that from our perspective a Church which rejects Tradition and accepts Scripture selectively ceases to be a Church. It is no longer a community of Christ's followers but a group of people who like only certain aspects of the Christian worldview, i.e. those that do not contradict contemporary liberal norms. And the theology which serves the interests of this group of people ceases to be Church theology. Having embarked on the shaky territory of personal predilections of certain authors bound by the handcuffs of ideologies and prejudices, this pseudo-theology will die out and from the Church's perspective has no legitimacy.

I recall how twenty years ago, when I was in Oxford working on my doctoral dissertation, I came across in the library a whole section of books under the heading 'Gay and Lesbian Theology'. In one of these books under this heading the author spoke of how he was long ashamed of his sexual orientation but when he finally 'accepted' it, he was able to look upon not only church life but also the Gospels in a new light. In particular, he realized why Christ sent his disciples to preach not individually but in pairs... I think that no further commentary is necessary.

I have no doubt that in the intervening twenty years the 'Gay and Lesbian Theology' section in the library

of the theological faculty of Oxford University has been added to by many new 'researches' containing similar 'revelations'. I have no doubt that on the shelves of the library of Uppsala University similar such literature is represented in abundance. However, I am an Orthodox Christian and I am deeply convinced that this type of theology from the perspective of scholarship has zero value and in moral terms can be evaluated with a minus sign.

The Orthodox Church to this day remains true to the spirit and letter of Holy Scripture which is interpreted by Church Tradition. We see no need or even possibility of creating a theology which would serve the needs of people whose views on Christianity and Christian morality do not correspond to the teaching of the Church. The Church does not reject such people, she works with them pastorally. Yet Church theology continues to remain the same pure and uncontaminated source that it has been for two thousand years. It develops, yet at the same time retains its absolute and straightforward fidelity to the teaching of Christ and the apostles as fixed by Church Tradition.

## **2. Church Tradition As Liturgical Experience**

The Orthodox Church understands Scripture not to be an accumulation of texts belonging to authoritative writers, not as a library, but as a church where worship is conducted within. In itself this phenomenon contains answers to many questions posed by modern-day academic scholarship. Church services do not narrate the structure of the world that God created. Worship, via ancient images, metaphors and allegories, communicates to the faithful the truths of Divine Revelation, speaks of the spiritual state of the soul and teaches one how to be in communion with God.

One who does not accept this 'New Testament view of the world' simply falls away from this living current of divine revelation and ceases to be a bearer of Church Tradition. In other words, he deprives himself of the experience of liturgical life and the spiritual experience of faith. Therefore, there is nothing unusual in that 'theological scholarship' in the hands of such people bears the imprint of not belonging to Church Tradition, the loss of the apostolic faith. Their academic researches may have some interest for themselves and for a narrow circle of those like them, but it has no worth for the Church. That is why their works are published in small print-runs and are read by a small number of specialists, whereas the works of the church fathers, at least in the Orthodox countries, continue to enjoy great popularity and attract the interest of simple believers who are a part of this experience reflected in their works.

The sense of belonging to the living prayerful experience of the Church was superbly expressed by St. Augustine:

'O God, who did not wish the truth to be known by solely by the pure... You are called by the God of Truth in whom, from whom and through whom all things are true. The God of Wisdom in whom all things

are wise. And the human person , who is but a small part of thy creation dares to sing thy praises.'

Without a liturgical life, without the unique experience of communion with God which is possible only within the Church and comes about through participation in worship and the sacraments, the human person is incapable of grasping the truths of Divine Revelation. The books of Holy Scripture become for him simply texts and researchers believe that nothing remains other than to critically work through these memorials of ancient literature. This too explains the reasons why for some of those in the academic world the books of the Bible have become a complex accumulation of additions, redactions and interpolations.

When we speak of liturgical experience as an essential condition of scholarly research, we ought to ask ourselves what do we exactly mean by theology. We have become accustomed over the last few centuries to understand theology to any scholarship which is concerned with religious texts.

However, within the expanse of Church Tradition, in the liturgical texts of worship, theology highlights the unique phenomenon of human nature. The Orthodox Church has ascribed the title of 'Theologian' only to three saints: the Apostle and Evangelist John, Gregory of Nazianzus and Symeon the New Theologian. In his homilies on the fourth Gospel St. John Chrysostom writes of how the beloved disciple of the Lord possessed a special, rare gift of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to this gift he spoke 'from the depths of the Spirit, from those mysteries which the angels did not know had previously been accomplished. And the angels, together with us through the voice of John and through us have been taught what we have known... The angels came to know this through the Church...

Church Tradition is the experience of the saints' communion with God. According to Chrysostom this experience is the source of the knowledge of the divine mysteries even for the ranks of angels. Evagrius Ponticus defines the link between theology and the experience of communion with God with exact precision: 'A theologian is one who prays. If you are able truly to pray, then you are a theologian'.

### **3. Theological Scholarship and its ideal model**

There is no need to go into detail on how theological scholarship in our faculties cannot in full measure be the same as that of St. John Chrysostom or St. Augustine. Yet it can and must be directed towards Church Tradition as a minimum in two directions.

Firstly, this concerns theological education. Unfortunately, with every passing decade university programmes are cutting courses on the study of the patristic and liturgical heritage of the Ancient Church. As a result there are graduating from theological faculties Masters of Theology who have studied ancient languages and understand the theories of biblical criticism and yet at the same time do



not have a proper understanding of patristic exegesis, have never read the *Five Homilies on Theology* by St. Gregory of Nazianzus and know nothing of the texts of the Lenten Triodion or the Philokalia.

Secondly, modern-day theological scholarship must return to fulfilling those tasks for which it was created by such intellectuals of antiquity as Origen, Clement of Alexandria and others. The ideal tasks of theological science would be work upon the texts which we ascribe to the treasure-trove of Divine Revelation. Instead of 'criticism', 'demythologization' or 'desacralization' of Scripture, we ought to return to the way of its reverential and thoughtful study, to translation work and academic commentaries without ideological conditions.

Today the Russian Church has embarked upon a huge and important project - the preparation of new textbooks on all the basic theological disciplines that will be studied for a bachelor's degree: these textbooks ought to become the standard for our theological seminaries. We have set the authors of the textbooks the following task: to remain completely within Church Tradition, and yet at the same time to take into account all the basic achievements of contemporary, including western, theological scholarship. This task may seem very difficult, yet I am sure that it can be carried out.

By way of example I can give you our course of textbooks on biblical studies. There are to be nine of them: five on the Old Testament and four on the New Testament. Each textbook should be about the biblical texts but in their interpretation there should be taken into consideration both the Orthodox tradition as reflected in patristic and liturgical exegesis and the data of contemporary biblical criticism. In both instances it transpires that between Church Tradition and biblical criticism there are no insuperable differences: on the contrary, these two layers often complement each other, making for the student the study of sacred texts an interesting undertaking capable of developing his stereoscopic vision and his all-round approach to biblical sources. Often the data of biblical criticism merely confirm that which is contained in patristic exegesis.

This is the way we want to proceed in and it is in this direction that we want to develop our theological scholarship. It is clear that we cannot be partners with those for whom theology is merely a means of justifying their ideological oddities which are at radical odds with Christ's teaching and Church Tradition. We are prepared to hold dialogue with these theologians, but only to a certain limit beyond which dialogue becomes meaningless and counterproductive.

The contemporary state of affairs in theological scholarship may be compared to an old garden that has suffered from a storm. The branches of the trees are broken and the garden bears little fruit. We can uproot everything, burn it and sow upon the soil the new cultures of a 'genetically modified' theology and as a result reap a harvest of weeds and undergrowth. Or we could be like a loving gardener and restore carefully the crowns of the trees destroyed by the wind. And then the garden will once more bring forth

fruit.

The way along which the theological scholarship of our institutes and universities will develop depends wholly on what type of personal approach the bearers of academic knowledge will bring to all that the Church means by Holy Tradition.

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