

Purification by Atheism

Sobornost 5/4 (Winter 1966) 232-248; also in A.M. Allchin (ed.), *Orthodoxy and the Death of God*: supplement to *Sobornost*, Vol. 1, 1971. Originally published in the review *Contacts*, and has been translated from the French.

I. Christianity Against Freedom?

Christianity first appeared as the affirmation of man's liberty in the prison of a view of the universe in decay and seen no longer as the place of God's revelation but as the plaything of fate. 'O man, consider your royal dignity', wrote S. Gregory of Nyssa. 'The sky has not been made in the image of God as you have been, nor the moon, nor the sun, nor anything which can be seen in creation.... See, of all that exists, nothing can contain thy greatness.' (*2nd Homily on the Song of Songs*.) The ineffable God, revealing himself as Love and the Lover of Man, opened 'the roads of freedom' to all.

Now for many of our contemporaries, Christianity appears as a means of enslavement. God is thought of as against man; he is the enemy of man's liberty and dignity. Man must eliminate God in order to take possession of his own nature. This is the central theme of Feuerbach, applied to sociology by Marx, and taken up again with less optimism but with a still more radical demand for freedom, by the atheist existentialism of our century.

How are we to explain this reversal? Making a very broad generalization, we may point to two series of causes, the one group sociological in character, the other group theological.

Since Theodosius the Great, and with a distinct aggravation of the situation in the West since the time of Char-

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lemagne, God has become a God who has been imposed. Throughout the Middle Ages nations were converted *en bloc*, not by the growth of personal conviction, but as political and social units on the orders of their lords. The Germans were forced to baptism at the point of the sword. Everywhere, even in the countries which were freely converted in the pre-Constantinian era, by a regression to Old Testament ways of thinking, the image of God became identified with the image of the emperor, or of an earthly king. God became the keystone in the structure of society, social prohibitions were christianized, their transgression was denounced as sin.

In the East, the more sacramental and less sociological conception of the Church, the relative balance between hierarchy and prophecy, the evangelical poverty of elements in monasticism, the constant celebration of the trinitarian mystery and of the divine love for man in the liturgy performed in a language understood by the people, maintained a greater tension between Church and State, a space where spiritual liberty could put down its roots despite the appearances of the sacralization of the Empire. In the West, where the Pope tended to usurp the powers of the Emperor in order to constitute the Church as a super-state, the process went much further, so that without ever being able to destroy the eschatological tension (it was enough to celebrate Mass to reveal it) a thousand years of various wars of religion followed, amongst them real genocides (the Albigensians) and a totalitarianism of transcendence (the Inquisition). Orthodoxy at this point was only a tardy imitator, with the per-

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secution of the judaisers and the old believers in Russia. Toynbee has shown how modern unbelief develops from the end of the seventeenth century in opposition to the scandal of 'forced communions', and the persecution of Protestants and Jansenists in the France of Louis XIV.

The result has been that in the West, the West which has decided the outer history of the Christian world and whose conceptions have partially come to dominate Orthodoxy, the whole enormous movement of search, of revolt, of freedom which the modern world has made and whose roots are fundamentally Christian, has been made outside the Church and against the Church, thus sliding towards atheism, towards the negation of the imposed God, through ignorance of the Holy Spirit and his sacramental sources.

Thus at the very moment when the Churches were carrying on a vain struggle against liberty, the industrial revolution took place and the demand for freedom was paralleled by a demand for justice. This too had Christian roots. It came, via the movements by evangelical poverty during the Middle Ages, from the attacks

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on property and inherited wealth made by the Greek fathers, and above all from their identification of Christ with the poor, so clear and so moving in the writings of S. John Chrysostom. And certainly, English-speaking Christianity did produce a pragmatic socialism, whose value we appreciate today. But it ignored and ignores the global proletarianizing of the colonial countries. Russian Christian thought was haunted by the subject of the communion of man, it refused any 'theology of property', and produced the slavophil reforms. But these, hindered by a nostalgia for old rural community forms, were incapable of mastering an industrial civilization, brutally imported from the West, and it was outside the Church that the Russian revolution finally took place. In it the instinctive eschatology of a nation steeped in Orthodoxy found expression in the secularized eschatology of Marxism. Finally, in the Catholic countries, after the brief appearance of liberal Catholicism, the break was even more complete, on the purely sociological level, between the 'theology of property' and socialism. This socialism still in 1848 often of a religious, if anti-Roman, inspiration, became closely bound up with a materialist metaphysic. The feeling of the working class world towards the

Church in the Latin countries can be expressed in the dictum of Proudhon, 'Whoever talks to me about God, wants either my money or my life'.

In the nineteenth century, the rebellion against God of those who were hungry and thirsty for righteousness, was joined with that of those who were hungry and thirsty for creation. In the West, the process of clericalization, to be seen even in the conception of the royal priesthood which the Reformation sought to rediscover, the tendency to slip from symbol to speculation, from sacramental to sociological, made moral demands triumph over the power of transfiguration.

The individual became structured and seized upon the fallen world, but worship no longer flowed over into culture, and the divorce between Christianity and beauty became complete. This is the cause of the agonized protest of Nietzsche against a religion reduced to moralism and sentimentality, which was incapable of deciphering the religious meaning of the created world. The great explorers of beauty, Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Van Gogh, Nietzsche himself could only isolate themselves in silence or in madness, for lack of a creative doctrine of the Spirit.

In the East, the creation of life and beauty, still so clear in the period of the Paleologoi, and of Rublev, gradually became a matter of folk-lore, and collapsed, at the level of collective life, under the impact of the rationalism and technology of the West. The sense of an ontological transfiguration was preserved only by certain men and women of the spiritual life, apart from the modern forms of

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culture and society. Russian religious philosophy began spiritually to take up man's modern quest, began to make a true response to Nietzsche, but for lack of any similar effort on the social plane it remained the privilege of a few, soon scattered or reduced to silence by the revolution.

From an Orthodox point of view, these historical factors follow necessarily from factors which are strictly theological, in the sense in which theology is not a speculation but the intellectual matrix of the whole of life.

The fundamental theological problem here is that of the freedom of man. If God knows everything in advance, and can do everything, then human history is reduced to

the level of a puppet play, man is nothing, and God is to blame for all the evil in the world. Here we touch one of the deepest roots of the anti-theism of the nineteenth century, which remains living beneath the indifference of our own age. God is constantly accused. The existence of evil and divine omnipotence appear contradictory. Therefore God does not exist. 'God is evil itself' said Proudhon again. One recalls the argument of Ivan Karamazov taken up again by Albert Camus, about the suffering of innocent children.

In the perspective of the main Orthodox tradition we can discern a triple theological weakness at this point.

In the first place the eternity of God is made into a thing, is conceived as a kind of platform dominating the whole passage of time, including the future which is by that very fact also made into a thing. This all-knowing God, whose gaze in some way changes time into space, puts questions but already knows the answers, seems to converse with men but ultimately only speaks to himself, seems to wait, 'to repent', and hope, but already overshadows the future. How can we be surprised at the difficult questions which were raised by the philosophers of the seventeenth century, Why pray? What use is petition?

With this rigidified conception of eternity and the divine omnipotence is mixed throughout the spiritual history of the West the inextricable problem of freedom and grace. Insoluble because posed not in terms of encounter, of living exchange of 'Synergy', but in terms of causality; what is the cause of salvation, of freedom, of grace? The amazed intuition of the gratuity of salvation—the prevenient majesty of the love of God—as it is hymned in *The Confessions of S. Augustine*, became the doctrine of predestination, when the same Augustine, and his disciples down to Calvin, wished to conceptualize it; finally it became the doctrine of double predestination. Few ideas have played so great a role in the uprising of atheism. And what does it matter if Barth, combining double predestination with a mechanical 'apocatastasis' now writes

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a veritable Gospel according to Judas, showing us that only one is damned, God himself? We do not see what man is for.

The foreknowledge of God made into a thing, the setting of the problem of grace and freedom in terms of causality and opposition, both doubtless are rooted in an inadequate Christology and Pneumatology. In the logical climate which has dominated the West since the thirteenth century, the emphasis has been on the merits of Christ, on sin and redemption, on the central importance of the Passion and the Cross to such a degree that the deification of human nature in the Risen Lord, in the Glorious Christ who is the one who is to come, as well as the one who has come, has been lost to view. The perspective of the filioque has subordinated the economy of the Holy Spirit to that of Christ, i.e. prophetic liberty to sacramental and hierarchical institution. But it is in the co-operation of freedom and the Holy Spirit that human creation finds its religious meaning, it is in the Holy Spirit that the revelation of freedom, justice and beauty is realized. Not against God, but in the mystery of the divine-humanity; for man is called, to use the expressions of Soloviev, to extend the God-man in a creative way, into the 'Godmanhood', the 'God-universe'.

The salvation which we proclaim is a salvation by love and for the creation. Offered in Christ, the divine-humanity is realized in a personal communion; grace and freedom are only the two inseparable aspects of a meeting of love. This meeting makes possible a mysterious and vital exchange; because God has become man, man can become God, be born in the divinity as God is born in the humanity. Man really shares in the divine life, in the 'movement of love' of the Trinity. And he is called to realize a 'trinitarian anthropology', where the transparency and uniqueness of each person is fulfilled in the real 'consubstantiality' of all men, where the Eucharist bears fruit in 'the sacrament of our brother'. 'The Trinity is our social programme' said Fedorov. From the first community at Jerusalem to S. John Chrysostom, from the Greek Fathers to the hesychast reformers of the fourteenth century, from Nil of Sora to Sergius of Moscow, a tenacious inspiration, often hidden in the depths of the Christian people, often preserved only by some few spiritual men and women, but always alive, has impelled the Orthodox Church to defend justice and liberty, just as she has defended the beauty of the icons and the transfigured ones. Today, in the context of ecumenical work, it is for her to carry this inspiration through, to discern and unite the best of the West, the sense of liberty, with the

best of the East, the sense of communion; not by sociological programmes, but by a creative inspiration, in communicating a fire which is that of the Trinity.

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In the perspective of the divine-humanity and of salvation by love, we feel, with the Greek Fathers and the Russian religious philosophers, that the creation of man, this masterpiece of the divine omnipotence, paradoxically implies a risk for God. The divine omnipotence is fulfilled in transcending our concept of omnipotence, that is to say in limiting itself, in running the supreme risk, the emergence of another liberty. We must then think of the act of creation at the same time in terms both of omnipotence and the limitation of omnipotence. In one of its aspects, creation is a continuous act of 'kenosis' on the part of God; many patristic sayings emphasize that God can do everything, except force man to love him. Indeed one must define more closely; freedom is not *something* which God has created, which could only put the problem one stage back, and repeat the atheist accusation, it is *someone whom he permits to exist*, and it links up with the limiting concept of original nothingness. It is less the 'work' of God than his 'withdrawal' so that *the other may be*. The other, that is to say the possibility of love but also of rejection, of rebellion, of hate. For God, the other is an infinite possibility of longing and of suffering, and this is the meaning of all love. The other, that is to say the Cross, the arms always offered, the side always pierced in a complete openness— so that the other may be, and be living. The *lifegiving* Cross— the only response to the judgment of atheism on freedom and evil.

God, because he is a personal God, a living God, and not a thing, a stone, an observation post above time, our God is bigger than our concepts of power and eternity. His true transcendence is not that of a rationalized theology, but of the freedom which breaks out at the end of every apophatic approach. *God is freedom who wills freedom. God is freedom who makes place for freedom*. His true transcendence, and that is to say his true freedom, is to will and to be able to risk; to will and to be able to limit himself, to will and to be able to veil his foreknowledge, so as to be able really to speak with the other, really to love the other, and to love with infinite respect, the infinite discretion, perhaps the infinite suffering of the one who awaits a free response, a free crea-

tion of common life. The true omnipotence of God is to allow a freedom to arise from the original nothing which can rebuff him; and finally his true omnipotence consisted in coming out from his impassibility in order to come down into the death and hell created by man, and to let himself be assassinated, so that he might offer resurrection to his assassins; and to offer it not as a thing, but as a life, as a free creation.

A tremendous upheaval is going on at the present time. The processes of secularization are freeing the Church from its moralizing role. It is less and less burdened with giving a sacred character

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to social prohibitions. And the prohibitions are changing sides! In countries of Eastern Europe, Christianity is declared immoral; and this is not on account of the behaviour of Christians but simply because of the recourse to transcendence. And let us be clear about it; everywhere in the West also, a universe is being constructed, the universe of science and its technical applications, which without explicitly denying transcendence, does without it. Cybernetics which determines our programmes, our plans, even our policies, does not take transcendence into account as one of the factors which disturb its electronic computers. It is not that they ignore all morality; they are orientated precisely towards human survival and happiness, they create their own prohibitions, but transcendence is excluded.

In this context, that of the 'Crystal Palace' prophesied by Dostoevsky with such genius, in this world controlled by mathematics, programmes, cybernetics, it is no longer rationalism which transgresses, but transcendence. A little longer, and the ineradicable instinct which growls in 'the man underground'. will reveal that this forbidden God is freedom. The breath of freedom; the Incarnation breaks all the laws of science, Easter blows into fragments the Crystal Palace which is secretly held together by the desire to forget death. The liturgical movement breaks through the time of evolution, and our famous sense of history. Ascetic renunciation ironically frees itself from the mystique of consumption and the erotic obsession.

This is why the future of Christianity lies less in moral preaching than in sacred transgression. The gratuity of

festivals, of love, of joy, roots the instinct of 'the man underground' in being— which is creative liberty. The future of Christianity is with the young people in revolt, however little we reveal to them in festival and holiness, which is interiorized festival, the insurrection of wholeness of life, the great game of freedom.

II. The Sadistic Father?

Authentic Christianity therefore proclaims God's 'mad love' for man, what Nicholas Cabasilas calls *philtron* [a 'love potion'], and the descent of Christ into hell, in order to destroy hell. However, for all its entry into a new period of atheist sensibility, new though still closely linked with the theme of freedom, Christianity surely still seems to be a religion of law and punishment, all the more terrorist in character in that its imprint has been given in the context of a Christian family, and that one has learnt simultaneously, not without mutual impoverishment, to obey God and social prohibitions, especially in the realm of sexual conduct. The atheist often sees himself as a liberator who kills the father, who breaks the idol

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of this infantile conception of God, so harshly denounced by Freud as 'the sadistic father'.

The Christianity of Christendom, and often enough still the Christianity of the family, have been constantly threatened by a double regression; judaizing and intellectualist, one might almost say, 'Socratizing' in the Nietzschean sense of the word. Medieval piety, as we have seen, expressed on the one hand a politico-religious imagery of God as King, which went back rather to a sort of Jewish monotheism than to a full representation of the Trinitarian mystery of love. If not in theology and liturgy, at least in popular feeling, the predominant image was often that of a 'monotheist' God, a jealous judge, a terrifying justice, and in nominalism and in certain elements of the Reformation, this transposition of the arbitrary king even entered theology itself.

At the same time an intellectualist, 'socratizing' regression took place in relation to the evangelical way of love, which is above morality. For Socrates, I generalize very widely, immorality came from intellectual error. It was enough to know the good in order to do it. In this way an absolute code of morality was extracted from the Gospels, summing up the law of Moses and making it

more heavy. The Good News, which before all else is the salvation of sinners, thus became the observance of a moral law, with eternal rewards and punishments. In the balance of virtues and vices, a curious image taken from ancient Egypt, the sins of the flesh very soon took on an obsessive importance, which they do not have in the Gospels, where Christ pardons the adulterous woman. The hard and necessary struggle of the great monks against 'the elements of this world', against an impersonal cosmism, in order to affirm transcendence and the freedom of the person, was often deformed into dualism, into an ascetic hatred of women and the created order. Renunciation became an end, not a stage on the way to transfiguration. In the West the celibacy of the clergy introduced a kind of incompatibility between sex and the sacred. Today it is a much greater factor in the isolation of priests than for example the prohibition of manual work, imposed for a time by Rome on the worker-priests.

In the West primarily, but also to some extent in the East, the eschatological hope of a definitive victory over death, and of a universal transfiguration, gave way to an obsession with individual salvation. The doctrine of the particular judgment, with the possibility of immediate and final hell at the moment of death, became more rigid in the Western middle ages. S. Augustine thundered against the *misericordes*, who were not necessarily Origenists, but perhaps quite simply Eastern men of spiritual life who prayed for the salvation of all. For him, and his thought was taken up again

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at this point by S. Thomas Aquinas, the sufferings of the damned form a delightful element in the beatitude of the elect. Let us notice in passing that S. Augustine's views on hell, predestination, and the fate of unbaptized children formed one of the avowed reasons for the atheism of Camus.

Thus the religion of victory over hell, frequently became the religion of an obsession with hell. To quote Leon Bloy, that Western prophet of a renewed doctrine of the Spirit, where was 'the raising up of the humble, the wiping away of tears, the blessedness of the poor and condemned, the presence of robbers in paradise, the virgin coronation of prostitutes'?

This 'terrorist' sensibility has profound theological roots, which I mentioned earlier in speaking of the unilateral importance given in medieval Western theology to the Man of sorrows, to the Crucified, so that the Transfigured, Glorious Christ, radiant with the light of the Holy Spirit was forgotten. It is just precisely the Anselmian doctrine of redemption which is at the root of it; God the Father subjected to human concepts of justice, and a justice with strange affinities to vengeance, the infinite nature of the man's offence demanding an equally infinite offering which only the sacrifice of the Son can bring, the Father thus sacrificing his Son to satisfy his justice and appease his wrath, redemption as the change in the divine anger— certainly this juridical theology is no longer current today but it has created a sensibility, a subconscious attitude, which it is not easy to get beyond.

Thus in the West, the meaning of the Cross and the personality of Jesus, was turned upside down in the popular mind. Originally the cross signified the destruction of death, the triumph of life. This is why the Christians placed the cross on their tombs. But today, for most Western people, the cross is synonymous with death, with the cemetery, with the sign of nothingness. In the same way the personality of Christ, in so many ways heroic, violent, triumphant, became suffering, faded, the picture of a failed 'idealist', a victim— the son sacrificed to the anger of a sadistic father.

And in history, the slow unfolding of the wars of religion was accompanied with an aggressively political use of anathemas, excommunication, and the threat of hell; for, in this perspective, hell is always for other people.

The reply to all this is to recall without ceasing and in the face of all juridical symbolism, the reality of redemption for deification, of the universal victory of Christ over hell offered to all men, of the revelation of the living God who is not a solitary despot, but the fullness of existence and of personal communion, the trinitarian life which man is called to share. 'Why was the blood of the only Son acceptable to the Father who had not been willing to accept

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the sacrifice of Isaac offered by Abraham, but had replaced the human victim by a ram? Is it not clear that the Father accepts the sacrifice not because he required it or

felt some need of it, but in order to carry out his design? It was necessary that man should be sanctified by the humanity of God, that he himself should free us by conquering the tyrant with his own power, that he should call us back to himself by his Son.... Let the rest be venerated in silence.' (S. Gregory Nazianzen, *Hom.* XIV. 22.)

Above all we must root ourselves always more deeply in the heart of the Gospel message, which is the proclamation and witness of *salvation by love*. 'God comes and declares his love, and asks us to pay him with love in return ... rebuffed, he waits at the door For all the good that he does to us, he demands only our love in return; in exchange for our love he absolves us from all our debt.' (*Life in Christ*.) Thus magnificently wrote Nicholas Cabasilas, a great lay theologian of the fourteenth century, who never ceased to fight against the 'terrorist' conception of God, emphasizing in relation to Judas, that the only sin which has no remedy is despair, unhope, refusal to trust. Indeed the only message which can reach the atheist today is that of Christ coming down, tragic and victorious, into hell, this hell of our separated, disintegrated condition, which contemporary literature, philosophy and psychology have explored so lucidly, and of which the splitting of the atom is in the end only an expression. Macarius the Great gives us an overwhelming parable of this hell, showing us fallen men as prisoners chained back to back in such a way that they can never look one another in the face in mutual trust. What we must say to the atheist of today is that however deep may be the hell in which they find themselves Christ is to be found still deeper. What we must say to all those who are wounded by the 'terrorist' God is that basically what is asked of man is not virtue or merit, but a cry of trust and love from the depths of his hell; or who knows, a moment of anguish and startlement in the enclosed immanence of his happiness. *And never to fall into despair, but into God*. I think of Marmeladov's monologue in *Crime and Punishment*, when he speaks of the Last Judgment. 'Then Christ will say to us, Come you as well, Come drunkards, come weaklings, come forth ye children of shame.... And he will say to us, "Ye are swine, made in the Image of the Beast and with his mark; but come ye also!" And the wise ones and those of understanding will say: "Oh Lord, why dost thou receive these men?" And he will say: "This is why I receive them, oh ye wise, this is why I receive them, oh ye of understanding,

that not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this! And he will hold out his hands to us and we shall fall down before him... and we shall weep... and we shall understand

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all things! Then we shall understand all things!... Lord, thy kingdom come!" Only humility and trust can heal the most mysterious and perhaps the most profound of sins, hatred of oneself— for the 'self' of man is *given* to him, and his consciousness of himself is necessarily participation in grace, for Christ, as Cabasilas wrote, has become our other ego.

Certainly it is not enough to rest at the level of words, speaking of repentance and grace; that is the temptation of the Protestant mind which minimizes the ontological importance of salvation. For the salvation which we proclaim, I repeat this, is salvation by love and for creation. And primarily it is for healing. In the wake of Dostoevsky, contemporary psychology has discovered in 'man's underground', the disintegration of sin, the sinner as the sick child, the child gnawed by secret suffering and solitude. We can make no witness here unless we also have a healing *praxis*, an adaptation and realization for our own time of the great traditional ascesis of prayer as the 'art of arts and science of sciences', capable of unifying man around his 'understanding heart'. Clearly we cannot without thinking apply the methods of the past to the man of the great city, of our technological civilization, drugged with noise and images, devitalized and suffering not so much from inhibition as from fragmentation. Clearly too, we cannot with impunity leave him in the hands of the mystics of India who know the secrets of concentration but are ignorant of the full revelation of the person, or of psycho-analysts who cleanse the dark side of man but do not know that *eros* is 'the *thirst* for immortality'. The great hesychast tradition is called today to take into itself and correct both the Eastern techniques of concentration and the contributions of psycho-analysis. It alone perhaps amidst the diverse traditions of Christian spirituality, can achieve this fully, for psychosomatic techniques of concentration, and the most pitiless psycho-analysis (taking in the angelic and demonic levels which modern science can only register in their reflections in the human psyche) have long been familiar to it. All this will not be in order to adapt man to his fall-

en condition, but to bring him, in the grace of the Holy Spirit, to a higher psycho-synthesis. It is necessary for hesychasm, freeing itself as it has begun to do here and there (in Rumania, or in the work of a writer like Paul Evdokimov) from archaic forms which corresponded to previous human situations, to bring that peace, that deepening, that capacity for welcome, that illumination of the things of every day by the light of the Resurrection, to our new solitaries, those of Antonioni's 'red desert', which alone can make Christianity something else than an ideology.

Only presences which give life, only *fatherly* presences, in the deepest sense of that word *fatherly*, can witness to God today;

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following in the profoundly Orthodox line of 'startchestvo' ['elderhood'] which Dostoevsky, in *The Brothers Karamozov*, contrasts as a healing light with the patricidal rebellion of Smerdiakov and Ivan.

The problem of fatherhood is without doubt the greatest problem of our age. We are arriving, or we shall soon arrive (it depends on countries and milieux), at the complete breakdown of traditional forms of fatherhood, from religious imagery down to the forms of social and political life, down to the rebellion of the poor, of women, of young people, of the colonized against every 'paternalist' structure and mentality, felt in the light of Hegel and Marx, as 'master-slave' relationships.

Between bad fatherhood, which is arbitrary tyranny, and bad brotherhood, which is chaos, boredom and the absence of all creative discipline, the duty of Christians is to search painfully for a living creation of a new reality in the light of the revelation of the Trinity. For the Christian cannot participate in the mystery of the divine fatherhood and witness to it validly save by the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Now the Son became the brother and servant of all, 'Do not be like the kings of this world...'. And he came to submit to every form of life, and to make it grow in the life-giving Spirit. The best contemporary psychologists, in the extreme cases of young people in revolt, teddy-boys, hooligans, rockers, give a clear diagnosis; these adolescents have been basically disillusioned by the father, whose archetype for them is almost always the policeman. But if an authentic human being comes, a

quiet witness to life, then all their repressed needs to respect, to admire, to love (in the vertical dimension) crystallize around him. The contemporary revolt against the father is not basically a denial of fatherhood as such, but a search for a *trinitarian fatherhood*, lived in brotherly respect for the other, in order that the life-giving Spirit may be communicated. It is a necessity which is creative for him who demands it, sacrificial for him who gives it. The death of the father in our hearts, symbolized in society by the death of the king, in the family by the disappearance of patriarchal structures, is intimately involved with the 'death of God', by a circular, intensifying chain of cause and effect. The spiritual resurrection of the father, not in order to enslave but to build and to liberate, could destroy one of the deepest roots of modern atheism.

III. Is God Exiled in Heaven?

We have to recognize that for the majority of Christians the Church is no longer experienced as the place of the deification of man and the universe, the only place where there is no longer any barrier between man and God in the mysteric unity of heaven and earth. On the contrary it seems to put itself forward unnecessarily,

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arrogating an absurd monopoly for itself. The omnipresence of God in the Holy Spirit, making real the life-giving power of the Risen Lord, has given place to a veritable exile of God in heaven; sometimes still the physical heaven (think of the havoc which the Copernican revolution played with popular faith, havoc which Soviet propaganda attempts to prolong today by making use of the astronauts), but above all the heavens of piety, of belief, of individual subjectivity.

In the early Church, 'the life in Christ' was powerfully experienced 'in communion', thanks to the unity of the Scriptures, the mysteries (sacraments) and mysticism. The scriptures were not the object of speculation but of a doxological assimilation which discerned their sacramental character. The events which they described became in the immanence of the Spirit the experience of the Christian called to be born in God. Mysticism was nothing else than the becoming conscious— in the sense of an awakening of one's whole being— of the divine life communicated by the 'mysteries' to the baptized, that is

to say those who were initiated. Faith opened on to an experience which for all was rooted in the liturgy; where a transfiguration of all the senses, of the whole of man's bodily nature was begun, by a total art, by the vibration of a beauty which symbolized and manifested the *soma pneumatikon* ['spiritual body'; cf 1 Corinthians 15.44-45: 'It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.... The first man Adam became a living soul; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit'] of the Risen Lord. Mysticism in this perspective, represented the interiorization, the deepening, the slowly won permanence of this ecclesial experience, in such a way that man, growing in sanctity, communicated the divine life to the rhythms of his body and to all the created environment, becoming the priest of the world on the altar of his heart, deciphering in an active way 'the flame of things', their paradisaic depth, preparing and hastening their definitive transformation into 'the burning bush'.

This unity has fallen apart. Its break-up took place in the West, but in the present age it has reached an Orthodoxy weakened in its intellectual (I do not say spiritual) awareness of itself. With the great systems of scholasticism, theology attempted to make itself into a science, leaving on one side both the negative approach and symbolism, and this has developed into a speculation on God, the work of the so-called 'natural' reason, in reality fallen reason. It has been a theology of concepts and systematizations, given over to the sufficiency of reason which separates and opposes things, when what it should do is die and be reborn in the waters of baptism so as to celebrate the mystery (think *in* it, not *about* it). The loss of a supra-rational theology, and its replacement by rationalized constructions is one of the causes of contemporary atheism. Such a theology is scandalous, wishes to impose itself and finally is recognized as useless. Scandalous, for it makes the most burning mystery

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into the neutralized object of a speculative knowledge reserved for specialists of Aristotle or Heidegger, verifiers of weights and measures who transform adoration into administration. Certainly they do not write with their blood. How to avoid the verdict of Marcel More? 'The word of people who have found a way of turning the cross into a comfortable arm chair can awake no echo in a century torn apart by essentially tragic realities.' This

theology is also scandalous because it wishes to constrain, claims to demonstrate the existence of God, and establish faith in the comfort of scientific demonstrations. It is a theology of guarantees, while faith is the personal adventure of man, going out to meet the personal adventure of God. Rationality has found its proper application in the mastery and control of the fallen world. On this level it has been perceived that the God of theological systems is only a word which we can very well do without. God only makes sense on a totally different plane, that of spiritual experience where the person is totally committed. There is no future for the God of Western theological speculation— who during ‘the Babylonian captivity’ of the Orthodox tradition has spread widely in the theological teaching of the Christian East.

The rationalization of theology brought with it an individualization of mysticism and a sentimental or intellectual degeneration of the liturgy. Romanesque art, like Byzantine art, creates a space which is full, saturated with the all-presence. Gothic art is an aspiration towards heaven where God is exiled. From spiritual bodilyness, sacred art moves to the dreamy *anima* of the Florentine *Quattrocento*, and then to the vital turmoil of the baroque. This active degeneration of Western liturgical art, which is rich none the less in creative discoveries and inventions at the human level, gives rise to a passive degeneration of Orthodox art from the seventeenth century onwards. While Orthodoxy was going to sleep, rocked in the sublime cradling of a half-heard liturgy, affective devotion was flourishing in Catholicism, and the Reformation gave rise to an essentially discursive form of worship, dominated by a thin Platonism which confused spiritual and intelligible. Mysticism no longer rooted in theology and liturgical unanimity slides into an inspired individualism. After the defeat of ‘pure love’ in the eighteenth century it leaves the Catholic Church, and one sees the strange evolution which leads from the illuminism of the eighteenth century to certain aspects of German romanticism, and from there to the pseudo-religions of the twentieth century.

Thus the Christian faith has become for most people a simple belief restricted to morality and subjectivity; it has ceased to open man to the infinite experience of ‘life in

Christ’, and ‘acquisition of the Holy Spirit’. The inner life has ceased to be ‘the art of arts and

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the science of sciences’. The love of discovery, experience, of a methodical *praxis* has been moved from the inner life towards the domination of the fallen world, towards science and its technical applications.

Science and technology have been made possible by the biblical revelation which gives the created world its proper consistence, and by the strictly Christian revelation, which frees the universe from the fallen spiritual forces which batten upon it. But the desacralization of the world by Christianity ought only to be a stage on the way towards its transfiguration. Now the rise of science and technology in the West coincided with the exile of God in heaven, and with the transformation of Christianity into a closed theism. Scholastic substantialism has almost destroyed the Christian metaphysic of participation and transience. The upsetting of the mysterious ‘balance’ between essence and hypostases in the approach to the mystery of the Trinity, brought about by the introduction of the *filioque*, in some way shut God up in his essence, and made it impossible to perceive the divine energies really penetrating the created order. The emphasis on redemption by the merits of Christ to the exclusion of the deification of human nature in the God-man, a human nature seen as including the flesh of the earth, has cut off the cosmic dimensions of the doctrine of redemption. Fallen nature, subject to necessity and death by the sin of man, was simply identified with God’s creation, and this brought about in the scientific field the same phenomena as are to be observed in the social field. State was set up against state. The Church tried to make the mystery into a science in opposition to science. It tried to put limits to research, and in Bonhoeffer’s words turned God into a ‘God of the gaps’ in human knowledge. Forgetting the *soma pneumatikon* and the spiritual potential of matter, both miracle and sacrament appeared more and more troublesome anomalies. Today demythologizing and existentialism allow them to be dispensed with, but then, faith, reduced to subjectivity, threatens to be dissolved into a pure and simple adhesion to the world, which alone is real and alone is interesting.

Thus in a universe desacralized by Christianity, but abandoned to its fall by Christians, we have seen on the one side a science and technology growing up, either with no goal beyond themselves or else secretly inspired by a Luciferian titanism, while on the other side, pantheisms, and mystical atheisms captivated by the mystery of the cosmos but opposed to the personal God have flourished. In the nineteenth century how many great poets were former students of theology or sons of pastors, who rejected Christianity as an abstract theism, in order to search for new names for God in the density of earthly reality? Today, when so many Christians see

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nothing in the world beyond a neutral decor, is it among them that we should find an openness towards the sacred, or the sense of the immeasurable, or rather is it in the solitary alpinist or swimmer, in the artist or scholar, who each in his own way penetrates into the cosmic *logos*, or in the spiritual explorer discovering the world as a theophany through the myths and realities of archaic civilizations?

Have we made God so small that sometimes he appears to the best of our contemporaries as less vast than the sea, less vast than the dark space where the astronauts revolve, less vast than the impersonal beauty of a tree or a young girl?

Here I believe, with all my being, that the answer is called Orthodoxy. With no exclusivism and wholly for ecumenical sharing, but basically Orthodoxy. And to be more precise, the meeting of the West with Orthodoxy.

The drama of modern Christianity in the West is to have unleashed the scientific movement without knowing the divine energies, while the East held the secret of these energies, but did not know the humanist impulse and the exploration of matter. It seems as if this secret was too weighty for the East alone, from the moment when it became an historical 'East', from the fifteenth century onwards. The great Byzantine synthesis, which united the best of the East and the West, left Palamism to Orthodoxy as a promise, as a seed. Now Palamism has been transmitted, but at the same time narrowed and obscured by the monastic circles which have scarcely understood its cultural and cosmic fruitfulness. Plethon was ignorant of it, and the religious philosophy of Russia was

almost ignorant of it, knowing the *Philokalia* only in the watered down, pietist version of Theophan the Recluse.

Today the meeting of the West with Orthodoxy, not least in the Orthodox countries themselves, gives us the possibility and the duty of making a renewed expression of Palamism. Only a theology of the divine energies shining in the Holy Spirit from the glorious Christ can give Christianity a cosmic dimension, and establish the religious meaning of human creativity and beauty. God is not exiled in the heavens, he is not the 'stop-gap' of human ignorance; he is *at the centre* of beings and things, *in the depth of all love*, of all beauty by the radiance of his energies, which we must know how to discern and liberate by re-establishing in the movement of thanksgiving the great circulation of glory between heaven and earth, 'We offer thee thine of thine own, in all and for all' [Prayer of the Elevation during the Divine Liturgy].

In the radiance of the glorious Christ, whose holy flesh is woven of the flesh of the whole earth, faith is not a simple existential colouring, but an experience inseparably personal and ontological. It knows and it reveals the spiritual modality of all existence, openly in holiness and in miracles, hiddenly in the sacraments, a modality

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which necessarily escapes natural science, shut in, as in all rational knowledge, by the fallen aspect of creation, which it must learn to control for the survival of mankind. But science is only apparently neutral, above all when by atomic physics or biology it reaches the question of the very stuff of the material universe, or the conditioning of the innermost heart of the person. Here it is not a question of moral prescriptions. It is a question of knowing whether, in the person of the scientist, a Luciferian titanism is at work, the old dream of a *homunculus* [in alchemy, the creation of a man by human artifice, or rather, the human being so produced], a creature not of God but of man, or [not] of a Christianity of transfiguration, capable in the light of Tabor to enlighten the whole field of scientific research.

The integration of the *logos* of the cosmos into the 'religion of religions', that of the Word made flesh, will make possible not only a liberating illumination of science, but also of art, of the nostalgia for paradise of our civilization of leisure, and of the theophanic myths of the ancient

religions. In this integration it seems to me that the Orthodox of Greece have a privileged vocation. Greece is the only Christian country where the sanctuaries of antiquity, exorcised by time and by long Christian prayer, have become, beyond all pagan limitations, temples of the beauty of the world. Cosmic icons, they express the sophian character of the earth under the dome of the sky. Not far from them, in the Byzantine churches, in this dome taken up again in architecture, the face of Christ is found. It is enough to see and to identify them, in order to be able to say with Nietzsche, but no longer against Christ but in him, 'I am he who blesses and who says yes from the moment you surround me, O Abyss of light'. 'In thy light shall we see light', as the Byzantine Office sings with the psalmist.

A renewed Palamism taking up and rectifying the intuitions of Russian religious philosophy requires the defini-

tive liberation of Orthodox theology from its long 'Babylonian Captivity'. It is not a question of escaping from rationalized theologies in order to fall into the meagrely subjective existentialism which comes from Germany today, and has no real faith in the Resurrection and no power of transfiguration. Neither is it a question of neutering the Fathers by being content to repeat them. More than ever theology can only be the intellectual (and poetic) aspect of a total art; the art of dying so as to be reborn according to a liberating spirituality, the art of giving one's life for one's friends, the art of sharing in worship with one's whole body, with one's whole being, in the eschatological certainty that the world is 'a game of God'.

In the world of cybernetics and boredom, the future of Christianity is to open itself to the creative liberty of the Spirit, 'the giver of life'.

.o.O.o.