

Sergey A. Chursanov

The Trinitarian Doctrine and Christian Anthropology in Russian Orthodox Theology of the 20th Century

Abstract

Close attention to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity constitutes one of the very characteristic features of the theological concerns of Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century. While investigating the Trinitarian doctrine such leading Russian orthodox theologians as Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958), John Meyendorff (1926–1992), archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) (1896–1993), and others attempt to clarify its soteriological meaning. It is for this reason that they concentrate considerable efforts on highlighting the significance of Trinitarian understanding of God for Christian anthropology.

Dealing with this theological task has required far-reaching methodological reflection resulted in formulating and clarifying a number of key methodological principles. One of them consists in rooting theology in the experience of personal communion with God. This methodological prin-



Sergey A. Chursanov is Associate Professor Dr. of Systematic Theology and Patrology at the Theological Department of St. Tikhon's Orthodox University, Moscow

ciple manifests itself in *free using of philosophical means* in theology. This way of theologizing leads Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century to extensive *apophatic purification and transformation of philosophical notions*. The profound comprehension of the content and meaning of the notion of *uniqueness* of both divine and human persons provides the representative example of theological considerations based on this theological method.

Russian methodological heritage of the twentieth century supply contemporary theologians with effective means of dealing with actual theological issues. Thus, the method of *apophatic purification and transformation of philosophical notions* in theology permit preventing ontologically and soteriologically unacceptable conclusion that traditional patristic doctrine on the Father as the only *cause* (αἰτία) of the Son and the Holy Spirit unifies their hypostatic origin and consequently deprives each of them of hypostatic uniqueness. Indeed, in order to resolve this doubt the notion of *cause* in the doctrine on the monarchy of the Father playing in contemporary theological anthropology such a notable role should be untied from the implicit deterministic idea that one *cause* has the same effect.

Keywords

Theological method, Trinity, human being, monarchy of the Father, cause, person, uniqueness

One of the main distinctive features of Russian orthodox theological thought of the twentieth century consists in constant attention to the doctrine on the Holy Trinity which is considered to have a decisive importance for Christian theology in whole and for its particular aspects. Another constituent theme of great importance for Russian theology of the twentieth century is theological understanding of human being.

There are three basic ways of drawing the consequences for Christian anthropology from Trinitarian doctrine in Russian theology of the twentieth century. The first and least explicit one implies that all characteristics attributed to God acquire for human beings the supreme ontological rank and form a base for structuring their world-view and experience. The second and much more elucidated way of basing anthropology upon Trinitarian teaching springs from theological understanding of human as image of God fully revealed by Christ. This theological approach results in the third characteristic tendency — to use in anthropology the same basic theological notions as in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and Christology.

Most clearly these basic theological lines were elaborated in the works of three foremost orthodox authors: Vladimir Nickolaevich Lossky (1903–1958), protopresbyter John Meyendorff (1926–1992), and archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) (1896–1993). It is precisely their theological writings which form for the present article the set of key sources.

The **first part** of this article represents basic theological approaches methodologically uniting those Russian orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, whose theological heritage it is devoted to. Its **second part** addresses the theological understanding of the uniqueness of divine persons — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as well as the uniqueness of their created image — human person. The **third part** of the article concentrates on the theological meaning of the notion of *cause* (αἰτία) in the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father.

1. Basic methodological principles

The Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century whose theological contributions to Christian Trinitarian doctrine and Christian anthropology will be discussed in the present article are united methodologically.

First basic methodological principle that they consciously follow consists in considering soteriological aspirations to be the distinctive feature and the criterion of theology. Vladimir Lossky sets out that Christian theology is not an end in itself. He asserts that “[u]nlike gnosticism, in which knowledge for its own sake constitutes the aim of the gnostic, Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge. This ultimate end is union with God or deification”¹. It is a soteriological goal to help Christians to “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1.4) which directs the east patristic theological efforts. According to the words of Vladimir Lossky: “All the development of the dogmatic battles which the Church has waged down the centuries appears to us (...) as dominated by the constant preoccupation which the Church has had to safeguard, at each moment of her history, for all Christians, the possibility of attaining to the fullness of the mystical union”². Such commitment to soteriological tasks directs Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century to the next methodological guideline consisting in basing theological considerations on the Christian experience of human communion with God. This methodological principle manifests itself in a special attention to the existentially and soteriologically rich patristic writings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Athanasius the Great, the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John of Damascus, and St. Gregory Palamas. It also leads Russian theologians of the twentieth century to a conclusion that any authentic theology presupposes the personal experience of communion with God for both the author and his or her readers. John Meyendorff elucidates this issue in following words: “Not that a rational deductive process was completely eliminated from theological thought; but it

¹ V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1957), p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

represented for the Byzantines the lowest and least reliable level of theology. The true theologian was the one who saw and experienced the content of his theology; and this experience was considered to belong not to the intellect alone (...), but to the 'eyes of the Spirit,' which place the whole man — intellect, emotions, and even senses – in contact with divine existence"³. In such a perspective, Christian theology becomes one of the fields of the communion of Christians in their experience of communion with God.

Clarifying their understanding of Christian theology, the Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century often underline its difference from philosophy. Vladimir Lossky gives historical ground for this issue: "The theology of the Orthodox Church, constantly soteriological in its emphasis, has never entered into alliance with philosophy in any attempt at a doctrinal synthesis: despite all its richness, the religious thought of the East has never had a scholasticism. If it does contain certain elements of Christian gnosis, (...) the speculation is always dominated by the central idea of union with God and never acquires the character of a system"⁴. Along with characteristic soteriological concerns of Christian theology, Vladimir Lossky highlights its stemming from divine revelation. According to his sharp words: "Revelation sets an abyss between the truth which it declares and the truths which can be discovered by philosophical speculation"⁵.

This understanding of the correlation of Christian theology and philosophy guides Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century to the subsequent methodological principle consisting in *free using of philosophical means*. Following this method-

³ J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), p. 9. Cf.: *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 10.

⁴ V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49. Cf.: J. Meyendorff, Reply to Jürgen Moltmann's "The Unity of the Triune God", *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 28/3 (1984), pp. 184, (183–188).

logical principle, they seek to use philosophical notions and reflections in such a way, which would allow avoiding conveying to theology philosophical problems, epistemological approaches, and ontological conceptions.

In order to realize this methodological program, Vladimir Lossky devotes a special attention to apophatic theological method. He tries to fulfil it through a methodological approach, which can be described as *purification and transformation of philosophical notions in theology*. Vladimir Lossky attributes this method of purification to eastern Holy Fathers characterising their theological activity in Trinitarian controversies as “super-human efforts (...) to purify the concepts of Hellenistic thought, to break down the watertight bulkheads by the introduction of a Christian apophaticism which transformed rational speculation into a contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity”⁶. According to Vladimir Lossky, the methodological result of paramount theological importance is that “[t]he apophatic attitude gave to the Fathers of the Church that freedom and liberality with which they employed philosophical terms without running the risk of being misunderstood or of falling into a ‘theology of concepts’”⁷. Dealing with the methodological issues of contemporary theology, Vladimir Lossky concludes: “The permanent memory of apophaticism must rectify the cataphatic way. It must purify our concepts by contact with the inaccessible, and prevent them from being enclosed within their limited meanings”⁸.

John Meyendorff describes this method of apophatic purification of the content of the words in theology in more detail:

“Theology (...) may and should be based on Scripture, on the doctrinal decisions of the Church’s magisterium, or on the witness of the saints. But to be a true theology, it must be able

⁶ V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸ V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), p. 33.

to reach beyond the letter of Scripture, beyond the formulae used in definitions, beyond the language employed by the saints to communicate their experience. For only then will it be able to discern the unity of Revelation, a unity which is not simply an intellectual coherence and consistency, but a living reality experienced in the continuity of the one Church throughout the ages: the Holy Spirit is the only guarantor and guardian of this continuity; no external criterion which would be required for man's created perception or intellection would be sufficient"⁹. Aforementioned methodological principles mean that Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century consider Christian theology to stem from different forms of divine revelation and human witnesses of the experience of communion with God. They also insist that while directing efforts towards the rationalized expression of the soteriological sense of theological doctrines, Christian theologian on a matter of principle should consciously recognize the insufficiency of any rational means for the complete expression of the super rational depth implied by fundamental theological sources.

2. Theological understanding of the uniqueness of divine and human persons

To exemplify the stated above theological method it is convenient to explore the notion of uniqueness in Trinitarian teaching and anthropology of the Russian theologians of the twentieth century.

2.1. The uniqueness of divine person

A struggle with Arianism puts forward the task of unreserved recognition of the Divinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Fathers of the fourth century had been solving

⁹ J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, p. 13.

this task through assertion that divine nature entirely belongs to each divine person. This task required also the acknowledgment of the absolute uniqueness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In soteriological perspective, the patristic insisting on the uniqueness of divine persons, or hypostases, along with underlining the commonness of divine nature means the rejection of pre-Christian pantheistic ideas tending to ignore any free, open, and unique personal – i.e. out-of-nature – relations of love while dealing with the issues of religious experience and growth. These pantheistic tendencies led to the magic understandings of spiritual life, i.e. to seeking for naturally determinative processes and to concentration on formal accomplishment of various rites and rules. The statements of the uniqueness of each divine person enables Holy Fathers of the fourth century to express the highest ontological rank of personhood and hence to show that in Christian experience the natural unity with God is inseparable from free personal relations of human persons with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the highest ontological rank given to personhood through underlining the personal uniqueness suggests that in Christian life personal relations with divine persons both logically and ontologically precede the natural unity with God.

The theological meaning of the word *hypostasis* (ὑπόστασις) in patristic Trinitarian usage due to conveying the idea of absolute uniqueness of each divine person is inexpressible in terms of any natural parts, aspects, properties or qualities. In the lecture delivered on the 12th of February 1955 at “Collège philosophique”, Vladimir Lossky examines the theological sense of this word and points out: “The line of thought which distinguishes οὐσία and ὑπόστασις in God uses metaphysical vocabulary; it expresses itself in terms of an ontology – in terms which here have the value of conventional signs rather than of concepts – in order to point out both absolute identity and

absolute difference”¹⁰. In final analysis, the absolute uniqueness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as three divine hypostases makes it impossible to treat *hypostasis* as a rational notion and to give it a conceptual definition. Vladimir Lossky conveys this conclusion in a following striking way: “In speaking of three hypostases we are already making an improper abstraction: if we wanted to generalize and make a *concept* of the ‘divine hypostasis’, we would have to say that the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases”¹¹.

Moreover, to be strictly accurate, due to the absence of any common property, which would belong to all divine hypostases and would not belong to their common essence, the category of number itself is inapplicable to divine persons. Saying with the words of Vladimir Lossky: «Three here is not an arithmetic number but indicates a Triad of pure difference – a Triad which remains equal to the Monad – an infinite passage beyond the dyad of opposition, so the hypostasis as such, inasmuch as it is irreducible to the οὐσία, is no longer a conceptual expression but a sign which is introduced into the domain of the non-generalizable, pointing out the radically personal character of the God of Christian revelation»¹².

2.2. The uniqueness of human person

Keeping in mind theological understanding of humankind as the image of the Holy Trinity and consequent interpretation of human persons as the image of divine persons, the Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century consider the unconditional uniqueness to be one of the main features characteristic for each human being.

¹⁰ V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), p. 112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹² *Ibid.*

However, unlike the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit human persons differ from each other not only in an absolute, i.e. personal, way but also through individual natural qualities. This condition creates for Christian anthropology a permanent danger to confuse absolute personal uniqueness with relative individual distinction. In this situation, the Russian theologians of the twentieth century decidedly reject the widespread view that it is individual qualities, which constitute the uniqueness of human person.

Vladimir Lossky explains the problem of expressing the theological understanding of personal uniqueness in a following way: “In our present condition we know persons only through individuals, and as individuals. When we wish to define, ‘to characterize’ a person, we gather together individual characteristics, ‘traits of character’ which are to be met with elsewhere in other individuals, and which because they belong to nature are never absolutely ‘personal’”¹³. In these circumstances, it is only the experience of personal relations, which enables human being to grasp the uniqueness of his or her neighbour. Vladimir Lossky concludes: “Finally, we admit that what is most dear to us in someone, what makes him himself, remains indefinable, for there is nothing in nature which properly pertains to the person, which is always unique and incomparable”¹⁴.

Metropolitan Antony (Bloom) (1914–2003) clarifies the issue through the example of bunches of flowers. Though flower bunches are distinguishable since each of them consists of different flowers, in a final analysis their distinction is by no means absolute because each bunch has been composed of “the same or similar flowers”¹⁵.

¹³ V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 121.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁵ Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *Samopoznanie [Self-knowledge]* (Trans. from French by T. Maydanovich), in *Idem, Trudy [Collection of Works]* (M. [Moscow]: Praktika, 2002), pp. 290, (289–301). (In Russian).

Indeed, the individual qualities vary human beings in forms and extents of common natural features. Therefore, it is in any way impossible to express the uniqueness of human being in terms of his or her individual qualities. In the lectures on Orthodox dogmatic theology, Vladimir Lossky explains: "Every attribute is repetitive, it belongs to nature and is found again among other individuals. Even a cluster of qualities can be found elsewhere. Personal uniqueness is what remains when one takes away all cosmic context, social and individual – all, indeed, that may be conceptualized. Eluding concepts, personhood cannot be defined. It is the incomparable, the wholly-other"¹⁶.

Underlining the absoluteness of the uniqueness of each human being, the Russian theologians of the twentieth century point out that human persons like their divine prototypes can be neither generalized by means of any rational concept nor even counted up. Vladimir Lossky concludes: "One can only add up individuals, not persons. The person is always unique"¹⁷. While expressing the traditional Christian ascetic experience of the highest appreciation of each human being, archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) also underlines the impossibility of counting the human person. Enlightening the theological concept of *persona*, he asserts that "[o]ne and only, unique and irreducible, it cannot be accounted for arithmetically"¹⁸.

The claims of the absoluteness of the uniqueness of human person form a theological basis for the assertions that every human being has the highest ontological rank and unconditional value. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) continues: "Per se the persona is excellence surpassing all other cosmic

¹⁶ V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, p. 42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *We shall See Him as He Is* (Trans. from Russian by R. Edmonds, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, 2004), p. 196.

values”¹⁹. Moreover Father Sophrony comes to the following decisive conclusion: “The person per se is the perpetual value, which is more than the whole of the rest of the cosmos”²⁰. It is such theologically valid considering every human being to be unique, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable entity that supplies theologians with essential means for producing theological elucidations of the evangelic commandments of absolute love constituting the ultimate foundation of Christian life.

3. Monarchy of the Father

3.1. The notion of *cause* in the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father

The theological method of apophatic purification of philosophical notions set forth by Vladimir Lossky enables a theologian to deal with actual theological issues. Applying this theological method to the word *cause* (αἰτία) in the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father, Vladimir Lossky points at four ideas characteristic to its philosophical usage and inapplicable to it in patristic Trinitarian teaching.

Firstly, and probably most obviously, in Trinitarian doctrine, the word *cause* should be purified from the idea that cause precedes its effect. Elucidating the theological sense of the word *cause*, Vladimir Lossky affirms that in the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father “[t]his unique cause is not prior to his effects, for in the Trinity there is no priority and posteriority”²¹.

Secondly, in patristic Trinitarian theology there is no place for an idea that a cause is higher than its effect. Vladimir Lossky states that the Father “is not superior to his effects, for the

¹⁹ Archimandrite Sophrony [Sakharov], *His Life Is Mine* (Trans. from Russian by R. Edmonds, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977), p. 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²¹ V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, p. 82.

perfect cause cannot produce inferior effects”²². In other words: “[A] principle can be perfect only if it is the principle of a reality equal to it”²³. For Vladimir Lossky, this understanding of the perfection of the Cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit follows from Christian understanding of the Father as not merely an absolute nature but also a person. Being divine person, the Father fully involves Himself in personal relations to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Vladimir Lossky asserts: “The Father would not be a true person if He were not this: πρὸς, towards, entirely turned towards other persons, entirely communicated to those whom He makes persons, therefore equals, by the wholeness of His love”²⁴. It means that it is the fullness of personal relations which results through personal love in the absolute unity of divine nature. Vladimir Lossky explains: “In God (...) the cause as fulfillment of personal love cannot produce inferior effects: it wishes them to be equal in dignity, and is therefore also the cause of their equality”²⁵.

Thirdly, in patristic Trinitarian doctrine an effect is not understood as external to its cause “as in the material world”²⁶.

Fourthly, the notion of cause in the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father is not considered to absorb its effect back “as in the ontological hierarchies of India and Neo-Platonism”²⁷.

Sequentially purifying the notion of cause in the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father, Vladimir Lossky arrives at a conclusion that “causality is nothing but a somewhat defective image, which tries to express the personal unity which determines the origins of the Son and the Holy Spirit”²⁸.

22 Ibid.

23 V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, p. 47.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, p. 82.

3.2. The monarchy of the Father and the uniqueness of the Son and the Holy Spirit

While insisting on the absolute uniqueness of each divine person, Professor Jürgen Moltmann maintains that the doctrine of the Father as the only cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit unites them in their hypostatic origin and undermines, therefore, their hypostatic distinctiveness. He asserts: “[W]ith the introduction of the philosophical term *arche*, the Son and the Spirit become indistinguishable: they are then both only the ones caused”²⁹. Considering the issue at greater length, Professor Jürgen Moltmann explains: “[I]f the Father is only named as the ‘origin’ of the divinity of the Son and the divinity of the Holy Spirit, then the specific difference between the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit is blurred”³⁰. The Trinitarian considerations of Vladimir Lossky give methodological resources to reply to this objection to the doctrine on the monarchy of the Father. According to the method of apophatic purification of philosophical notions in theology, the notion of *cause* in this theological doctrine should be freed from an implicit deterministic idea that the one cause necessarily produces the same effects. This freeing should be based on a distinction between the *natural cause* which presupposes this idea owing to the deterministic character of the very notion of *nature* and the *personal cause* which in no way presupposes any unifying necessity because of the

²⁹ J. Moltmann, God the Father in the Life of the Holy Trinity, *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 1/1 (2010), pp. 45, (38–48). Cf.: Idem, Gott der Vater im Leben der Heiligen Dreieinigkeit, *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 1/1 (2010), S. 56, (49–59).

³⁰ J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Trans. from German by M. Kohl, San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 188. Cf.: Idem, The Unity of the Triune God: Remarks on the Comprehensibility of the Doctrine of the Trinity and its Foundation in the History of Salvation (Trans. from German by O. C. Dean), *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 28/3 (1984), pp. 170, (157–171).

irreducibility of the notion of person in theological understanding to any natural content.

In final analysis, the ultimate theological sense of the doctrine of the monarchy of the Father consists in rooting Trinitarian discourse not in unifying and determining divine nature but in divine person who is irreducible to his own nature and safeguards the uniqueness and freedom of the persons of Tri-Personal God and multi-personal humankind.

4. Concluding remarks

Due to essential soteriological concerns, vital involvement in Christian life, wide range of expressive means being used in theological discourses as well as seeking for holistic theological view the Russian theologians of the twentieth century occupy in contemporary eastern theology a special place. At present their basic Trinitarian and anthropological lines are being successfully developed, modified, and perfected in theological works of metropolitan John (Zizioulas), Christos Yannaras, and other outstanding orthodox authors. The following words of metropolitan John (Zizioulas) provide a typical example concerning the notion of personal uniqueness having been examined throughout the present article: "Uniqueness is something absolute for the person. The person is so absolute in its uniqueness that it does not permit itself to be regarded as an arithmetical concept, to be set alongside other beings, to be combined with other objects, or to be used as a means, even for the most sacred goal. The goal is the person itself"³¹.

Moreover, currently basic Trinitarian and anthropological insights of the Russian orthodox authors of the twentieth century contribute to Christian theology in broad international

³¹ J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Contemporary Greek Theologians 4, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), p. 47. Cf.: Idem, P. McPartlan (ed.), *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 9.

perspective. Being deduced from basic theological doctrines and presented in existentially motivated forms, the Russian theological anthropology of the twentieth century acquires strong theological foundation along with openness to dialog, high integrating potential and suitability for further development. These distinctive features lend to it clear ecumenical significance and evident potential for further contribution to worldwide Christian theology.