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Elements of Orthodox Anthropology in Vladimir Lossky's Thinking and Their Relevance to the Contemporary Man

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Abstract

Vladimir Lossky represents an important Orthodox thinker on the issue of humanity, which is the great challenge of the 21st century. This study is dedicated to his anthropological conception and its relevance to contemporary debates on this topic. We shall insist on the subject matter of man as God's image which cannot be theologically understood without a deepening of the Holy Trinity teaching, and especially without understanding the relationship between being and person from a Trinitarian point of view. On the other hand, as far as understanding the “image”, it receives new meanings when approached from the perspective of the Incarnation of God's Eternal Word, Who came into the world to re-emphasize the divine image in man and to renew it, to make it holy, and to restore it, as the whole of humanity too. Vladimir Lossky's thinking on man gives a qualified answer to the reductionist anthropologies of modernity and post modernity. Valorising its profound and bright thinking, the Orthodox theology as well as the mission of the Church in the contemporary world will greatly benefit from the presentation of a vision on man that will keep it from falling or remaining in the vortex of secularization which makes the life of today's man like a desert and empty of meaning.

Keywords

Vladimir Lossky, Anthropology, image of God, Holy Trinity

I. General Considerations

Undoubtedly Vladimir Lossky, the Russian Orthodox theologian from the Diaspora, is among the Orthodox theologians who have marked the theological thinking of the 20th century in an unmistakable way. He presented the fundamental features of Orthodox theology to the Western world with scientific rigour, specific to the Western world. But through his writing he also transmitted the beauty, purity and authenticity of this theology in close connection with the pressing needs of the living man from that period, and from the next century too.

In order to better understand Vladimir Lossky's theology, one should notice some of its intentions. For this theologian it was of great importance to present the Orthodox theology to the Western man, but not necessarily a local Orthodoxy that was imprinted with the features of the Christian ethos, belonging to a well-defined geographic, cultural, spiritual, etc. space. On the contrary, his desire was to present the dogmas of faith which have universal validity and were inspired by the thinking of the Holy Fathers.

“Based on a very good knowledge of the Holy Fathers' writings, Vladimir Lossky presents the doctrine of the Church as both theology and mysticism. Mysticism means to evaluate the content of the Church common faith through personal experience, and theology is the lived and rationalized expression of the revealed tradition, lived for the benefit of all, in the ecclesial environment where the work of the Holy Spirit is present”.¹

Lossky wanted to show the West that Orthodoxy is not just a form of Christianity, but it is the plenary and lived identity of the Gospel over the centuries. To this end he brought the testimonies of the Church Fathers, where he found a kind of spiritual guide for the belief and existential experience in the Church Body. To him, it was of great importance not only to present the purity of the Orthodox faith with rigour, accuracy, concision and coherence but he also wanted to capture the believer's response to the call of Christ in order to feel some of the mysteries of His life and teaching, by making them part of his deepest being.

¹ Pr. Vasile Răducă, *Studiu introductiv la Vladimir Lossky, Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, București, Editura Anastasia, f. a. , p.25.

Lossky's second great concern was to reject the error of sophiology with a well-founded theological argument, which was philosophical-religious thinking, drafted by the Russian Diaspora theologian Sergei Bulgakov. Methodologically and canonically Lossky manages to capture the theological deficiencies of sophiology with particular accuracy, and in terms of dogmatic background of the problem. "He extensively points out the serious confusions and contradictions Bulgakov's sophiology is based on or are promoted by it: the confusion between person and nature in God, treating the divine nature as a personal principle (Sophia), and the confusion between the natural energies of Divinity and the Trinity Persons, who were attributed created qualities (Son – "male", Spirit – "female"), the pantheism emanating in cosmology and the uncreated character of the human person, the sophianic determinism of creation and salvation, the Apollinaris and Monothelite kenotic Christology, etc."² In contrast to Bulgakov's theological universe, Vladimir Lossky responds with the theological vigour of the argument: the Tradition of the Church is a living organism that has continuity since the apostolic age; the theological reflections must take place in its light and the ecclesial body cannot be ignored, where such theological approaches take place.

Thirdly, Lossky tries to present an Orthodoxy of Patristic inspiration, which is aware of its universal and ecumenical dimension.

II. Bio-bibliographic Landmarks

Vladimir Lossky was born on June 8, 1903, in Göttingen (Germany), being the son of the Russian philosopher Nicholas Lossky, who did his research studies in philosophy in that country. He spent his childhood in Petersburg where he began his university studies. Here he met the historian and philosopher L. Karsavin who would impress him by convincing him about the usefulness of studying the life and works of the Holy Fathers of the Church. Because of the Bolshevik revolution, and especially the expulsion of his family from Russia, he had to emigrate in 1922. His father received an academic degree at the Russian University in Prague, where he was active from 1923-1928. Vladimir Lossky left for Paris in October 1924,

² Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr. *Studiu introductiv la Vladimir Lossky, Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1995, p. XX.

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where he studied at the Sorbonne from 1924-1927 and took his degree in middle Ages history. Etienne Gilson had an influence on him, making him his disciple and Lossky obtained his PhD in philosophy. Since 1927 he prepared for his doctoral thesis, related to Meister Eckhart's thinking.

On 4 June 1928 he married Madeleine Schapiro, and they had four children. Despite being in exile, Lossky did not interrupt his relations with the Moscow Patriarchate at all. He began to publish articles and studies in Russian and French, and during the war he was part of the French resistance. In 1944 he published his reference work in Paris: "Essai sur la theologie mystique de l' Eglise d' Orient".

In 1945 together with Eugraph Kovalevsky he established Saint Denis Institute by disseminating an Orthodox theological education to meet the future priests in the French Orthodoxy. He was the professor and dean of this Institute, where he taught Dogmatic Theology and Church History.

During this period, other coordinates of his theological research began to crystallize, which were later materialized in distinct works that were published after his early transition to the eternal. Thus, in the academic year 1945-1946 Vladimir Lossky had several courses at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, related to the theme of *God's Knowledge*. These courses will be published later, post-mortem, in the volume *Vision de Dieu*.

In 1952 together with Leonid Uspensky he published the work *Der Sinn der Ikonen*.

After 1953 he no longer worked at Saint Denis Institute, but he continued to teach Dogmatics at the pastoral courses organized by the Patriarchate of Moscow.

He died suddenly on February 7, 1958, and thus Orthodoxy unfortunately lost one of its valuable servants.

Vladimir Lossky published only a few distinct works in volume during his lifetime. His research resulted in studies and articles published in various Western specialty journals, and his work was published entirely only after his death. In the following, we will mention his reference and representative works, and his thinking in its fundamental joints.

- *Spor o sofii* (The Dispute about Sophia), a work where he rejects the error of sophiology sustained by the Russian Orthodox theologians, and especially by Sergei Bulgakov, Paris 1936
- *Der Sinn der Ikonen*, in collaboration with L. Uspensky, Bern und Olten, Urs Graf Verlag 1952.

- *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Eglise d'Orient*, Paris 1944
- *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, Paros, J. Vrin 1960
- *Vision de Dieu, Délachaux/ Niestle*, 1962
- *A image et à la ressemblance de Dieu*, Paris Aubier- Montagne, 1967

III. Directions of His Theological Thinking

In spite of his short life (55 years), through his life and thought Vladimir Lossky proved to be a profound and mature theologian, developing his patristic inspirational theology. He was one of the pioneers who created the Orthodox theology guided by the thinking of the Holy Fathers of the Church, or, in other words, the neo-Patristic synthesis of the first half of the past century.

But Vladimir Lossky has also another theological merit: he presented the Orthodox dogmatic theology with stringent rigour, logic and consistency, and solid reasoning to make it accessible to Western readers. In other words, he testified about the values of Orthodoxy in front of a demanding scientific world that would not accept a presentation of Orthodoxy in a simplistic and unjustified way.

In the following, I will try to present some important directions in Vladimir Lossky's theological thinking in a synthesis, which made him unmistakable in the landscape of Orthodox theological thinking in the last century.

1. Vladimir Lossky brought back to the attention of the Orthodox thinking and the Church life, the importance of the Trinitarian doctrine for the theological thinking in general, and for the Orthodoxy, in particular. He saw that the whole assembly of theology and the life of the Church depended on how people understood the teaching of the Church about the Holy Trinity. In order to reach the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Vladimir Lossky was aware that one could reach its understanding and experience only by bringing back the mystery of the Incarnation to the theologian's attention. He rightly states that

“The Incarnation, the point of departure for theology, immediately puts at the heart of the latter the mystery of the Trinity. He Who is incarnated is indeed none other than the Word, that is to say,

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the second Person of the Trinity. Incarnation and Trinity are thus inseparable and we must stress the evangelical roots of the Orthodox triadology”.³

The Russian theologian was aware that a living, profound and dynamic theology cannot be conceived outside the testimony of Holy Scripture and, in particular, of the New Testament. Therefore, contrary to some criticism, he showed the evangelical foundation of the teaching on the Holy Trinity, underlining that this is clearly found in the New Testament. He states that

“The chief source of our knowledge of the Trinity is indeed none other than the Prologue of St. John, and that is why the author of these amazing texts has received, in the Orthodox tradition, the name of St. John the Theologian. From the first verse of the Prologue, the Father is called God, Christ is called the Word, and the Word, in this beginning which is here not temporal, but ontological, is at once God. These ... constitute the germ of all Trinitarian theology”.⁴

For the Orthodox theology it is of great importance not only the affirmation of the Trinity on the basis of the Holy Scripture, but also the clarification of the theological notions expressing the meaning of the Being and of the Person at the Trinitarian level.⁵

2. The problem of Filioque is also closely related to his favourite theme - the Holy Trinity. This theme with all that it meant from the ecclesial, theological, cultural, and historical point of view preoccupied Vladimir Lossky from his youth, when he studied the Middle Ages. The Filioque problem cannot be fully understood either outside the Trinitarian context on the one hand, or outside the philosophical thinking of a certain structure that influenced the theological thinking from the West, on the other hand.

3. The issue of creation was another direction of his theological thinking that held his attention. Lossky saw the theme of creation in the context of understanding the two beginnings:

³ Vladimir Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, trad. rom. Lidia și Remus Rus, Editura Enciclopedică, București 1993, pp. 43-44.

⁴ V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 44

⁵ See in this regard the extremely judicious highlighting of Vladimir Lossky on the notions of being and person in the Trinitarian communion, on the one hand, but also how these notional clarifications are reflected in the whole Orthodox theology (V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, pp. 49-57).

“Between the work of nature, primordial being of God and the work of will, implying relation with the other which is set up by this relationship itself. St. John thus evokes an eternal «beginning», that of the Word: the term here is analogical and denotes an eternal relationship. On the other hand, «beginning» assumes its full sense in Genesis text, where the calling forth of the world gives rise to time”.⁶

The creation of the world is an act of God’s liberty and will, Who created everything “out of nothing” on the basis of His almightiness and love.

4. Starting from the fact that all were created through the eternal Word of God, Lossky gave particular importance to Christology, highlighting some of its fundamental aspects. Thus, Jesus Christ is understood as “the image of the living God”, Who has two energies and two wills, on the basis of the two natures of Christ’s single Person, as true God and true Man. Having this double quality, He performed the work of redemption of the human race, opening the possibility of resurrection to all men.

5. Vladimir Lossky made an analysis on the double oikonomy of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as it is of particular theological importance and closely linked to the Church’s presence and work of salvation.

IV. Orthodox Anthropology in Vladimir Lossky’s Thinking

1. *The close link between the Trinity and anthropology* is the key to understanding the whole anthropology of Vladimir Lossky, where he finds analogies and opens perspectives to understand it in all its depth and complexity. Man is not simply according to the image of God the One, but he is according to the image of God - Love, the Trinity of Loving and Everlasting Persons. This specification has the gift of opening new perspectives on man, on his ontological structure and on his purpose in the universe, viewed in the context of the created and transient world and in the perspective of eternity⁷.

⁶ V. Lossky, *Introdúcere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 77.

⁷ For Father Staniloae, the image of God in man means the appearance of the mysterious character of the human being, who lives in communion and is connected with the Holy Trinity. In this regard, Father Stăniloae says the following: “But we live this

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Inspired by the profound theological thinking of the Church Fathers and of St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Gregory of Nissa in particular, Vladimir Lossky brings to light the theological reflections of this thinking, putting them in connection to the importance of man for the world, for humanity and for all creation. The starting point of such a vision is the image of God in man, linked to his prototype, which is God - the Holy Trinity. Therefore, Lossky pointed out the following: “the true greatness of man does not lie in his incontestable relationship to the universe, but in his participation to the divine fullness and to the mystery he carries in himself, that is to be the «image» and the «likeness»”. “In my quality of dust I am attached to the life here, from below, St. Gregory of Nazianz writes, but being also a divine part, I carry the desire for the future life in my heart”.⁸ Man's quality to be the “image” of God is an ontological fact which cannot be abolished by sin. Moreover, this iconic quality of man gives him value, dignity and the possibility of sharing the holiness of God. He raises the created world along with him to the heights of God's dignity manifested through it, helped by the work of man who rises to the likeness of God.

2. The mentioned Russian theologian understands man *in the context of all creation*, as in fact it is presented by the Sacred Scripture itself. Vladimir Lossky's reflections on man's quality as God's “image” have direct tangency to his relation with the whole universe. Because man was not placed in a subtle and indefinable place at his creation, but was set up by his Creator in the midst of the created universe, he can and must be seen and understood in close connection with this universe. The theological specificity of man's connection to the universe is brought to light by Lossky who compares it to the vision of antiquity on man. He says that

mystery as a person, and as a subject. And we live the mystery of our person as a source of unpredictable states, feelings and thoughts, as alive and updated in relation to the mystery of the person of our fellow men and with him. The mystery or divine image of our person and of other persons is revealed and updated in communion. In communion with peers, the mystery of interpersonal divine revelation is revealed even more. For only love between Divine Persons radiates the force of our interpersonal love. Interpersonal communion is a face of Triune communion and a participation to it. So the divine image in man is an image of the Trinity and it is shown in human communion” (*Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, (abr. T.D.O.) Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 1978, vol. I, p. 402).

⁸ V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 95.

“His relationship (man’s) with the universe finds itself somehow inverted when compared to the conceptions of antiquity; instead of becoming «disindividualized» to become «cosmic» and to merge into a divine impersonality, the absolute correspondence of his person with a personal God allows him to «personalize» the world. Man is no longer saved by the universe, but the universe is saved through man; for man is the hypostasis of the whole cosmos that participates in his nature, and the earth discovers its personal, hypostatic meaning in man. For the universe, man is the hope to receive grace and to unite with God, but also the danger of failure and falling”.⁹

As Lossky likes to say, man’s connection to the created world and to the cosmos is closely intertwined with man’s understanding of God’s “image”. He says the world follows man “when the connection of the human image with God - his prototype - is fulfilled. For man cannot aspire to take possession of his own nature without self-destruction, and in particular, the quality of microcosm in the world, but on the contrary, he discovers his fullness when he assumes the universe in order to give it to God. Therefore, we have a responsibility towards the world. We are the word, the logos that confesses it, and it depends only on us, if it is blasphemy or prayer. The cosmos can receive the grace only through us, as the body is prolonged by it”¹⁰.

Starting from the words of the Holy Scriptures, but also from the thinking of great Fathers of the Church such as St. Maximus the Confessor, Lossky asserts the very special position of man in the universe. In God’s plan the mission of man appears to be essential, as it is also revealed by St. Maximus the Confessor. For

“To the successive divisions that constitute creation there must correspond unions or syntheses accomplished by man, thanks to the «synergy» of freedom and grace. The fundamental division, in which the very reality of the created being is rooted, is that of God and the assemblage of creatures, of the created and the uncreated. Created nature accordingly divides itself into celestial and terrestrial, into intelligible and sensible. In the sensible universe, heaven is separated from the earth. On the surface of

⁹ V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 95.

¹⁰ V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 96.

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the latter, Paradise is set aside. Finally, the human being, the inhabitant of the paradise, is divided too by sex, into man and woman.”¹¹

The fundamental mission of man in the paradisiacal state was to overcome these divisions, to internalize or join these divisions of creation, so that together with the whole universe man could deify.

3. *The personal character of the human being* is one of Vladimir Lossky's theological statements with great significance. Again the Holy Fathers of the Church were those who inspired Lossky in understanding man as a person. By deepening this complex problem of the person from a theological point of view, Lossky did not risk to analyze this aspect of man, starting from man, but he anchored his reflections on the Trinitarian level. That is why the personal character of man cannot be understood in isolation and separately, but in connection with understanding the Divine Being as a personal reality. As Lossky said: “we should say a few words about the Divine Persons before asking the question: What is the human person for the theological thinking?”¹². God's personal reality should not be seen only on the oikonomic register, but this reality belongs to the divine intra-Trinitarian plan. This means: if there is an everlasting communion between perfect Persons, it does not make Them to be understood beyond Their personal character. “The thinking that makes difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis* of God uses the metaphysical vocabulary and it is expressed in the terms of ontology that have here the value of conventional signs more than concepts, to signal absolute identity and absolute difference”¹³. From here, Lossky translates this distinction between Being and Person in God, in terms of human existence; the common being of all men and the personal distinction of each human existence.

Father Staniloae detects a certain nuance in the distinction made by Vladimir Lossky's thinking between being and person, which he critically analyzes, rejecting a certain negative understanding of the human being, distinct from the person. Father Staniloae says: «Reflecting upon the

¹¹ V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 100.

¹² Vladimir Lossky, *După chipul și asemănarea lui Dumnezeu*, trad. rom. de Anca Manolache, Editura Humanitas, 1998, p. 106.

¹³ V. Lossky, *După chipul...*, p., 106. Lossky adds: “This introduction of a distinction between two synonyms was a terminological novelty, in order to express the inability to reduce hypostasis to ousia, the person to essence, but without, opposing them, as two different realities” (V. Lossky, *După chipul...*, p., 106).

distinction between person and nature, VI. Lossky allows for the existence of at least a partial opposition between them, attributing to person (in contradistinction to nature) the apophatic intimacy of the “image”, which is determinative for the individual. However the one who succeeds in becoming the hypostasis of human nature as a whole is no longer an individual, but a person. But in affirming this opposition he understands nature in the lesser sense of the word, that is, as the nature that is parcelled out among individuals. Thus Lossky wrote in part that “«individual» expresses some mixture of the person with the elements belonging to common nature, while «person» denotes what is distinguished from nature.” While agreeing entirely with the positive sense that Lossky assigns in the second part of his statement on human nature, we consider that the negative meaning he attributed to nature in the first part does not refer to the human nature itself, but to the disfigured state of nature. A nature cut in individuals no longer preserves the full and authentic features of nature, because it no longer preserves the harmony in itself. The person has become an individual not because he has interfered with the elements of human nature, but because he does not encompass all nature, as he wants to keep the nature that he represents apart from the whole nature.¹⁴ Father Stăniloae highlighted all these observations in Vladimir Lossky’s argument which I would rather understand as unclearness. Lossky points out the personal character of the human being with great power of conviction, which he understands in the context of the Holy Trinity teaching, on the one hand, but also of the teaching connected to the Mystery of the Incarnation, on the other hand.

4. Starting from man’s personal character, Lossky comes to speak of *a true theology of the divine image in man*. The divine image of man elevates him to a remarkable height, making him rise above all creation. The image of God in man gives him a real glory. “The true glory of man does not lie in his incontestable relationship with the universe, but in his participation in divine fullness, and in the mystery he carries in himself as “image” and “likeness”. St. Gregory of Nazianz writes: “in my capacity of dust, I am attached to the life here, but also being a divine part, I bear the desire for a future life in my heart”¹⁵. This desire of man for the next life is possible because man is also “after the likeness” of God, and there is a very close relationship between the two concepts. That is, man is in the image of God and constantly tends after the likeness of God.

¹⁴ D. Stăniloae, T.D.O. , vol. I, p. 405.

¹⁵ V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 95.

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“The man created «in the image» of God is a person capable of expressing God to the extent that his nature allows to be permeated by the deifying grace. And also the inalienable image can become after the likeness or not, to the last limit: that of union with God, when the deified man shows in himself by grace what God is by nature, according to St. Maxim's word, or the other limit of total decay ... placing him in the dark abyss of Hades”¹⁶.

The whole existence of man unfolds between the two coordinates of his existence: to be in the image of God and to struggle to attain the likeness with Him helped by the grace of God.

VI. Conclusions

1. For the Orthodox thinking, and I would dare to say not only for the Orthodox one, theologian Vladimir Lossky represents a landmark of theological reflection related to the great themes of Orthodoxy, and in close connection with the movement of ideas of each time. But he is also a landmark in approaching the issue of humanity, which is the great challenge of the 21st century, as it is stated on many occasions.

2. The theologian's thinking also shows us that in any way a theological theme cannot be approached without incorporating it into the whole Christian thinking and, in particular, without its patristic marks, which proves their novelty, freshness and topicality every time.

3. The issue of man was a real challenge to Lossky, perhaps because of his personal experiences of life too, beginning with the expulsion of his family from the Bolshevik Russia and continuing with the traumatic experiences in the West. In this context, he really asked himself the question: what really is man? in the context of so many troubles, wars, conflicts etc. He found the answer in the Orthodox theological thinking guided by the Fathers and Teachers of the Church, who were and still are the masters of illustrating a fascinating human image. They presented a thorough and living vision of man, which they understood in the light of the ontological rendering of God's “image” in man, in continuous and sometimes difficult dynamics, which is the fulfilment of his initial vocation, to turn into the “likeness” of God.

¹⁶ V. Lossky, *După chipul și asemănarea lui Dumnezeu*, p. 133.

4. For Lossky man represents that existence called to permanently humanize not only itself but also to elevate the whole creation with him in the order of the transfiguration grace. This theologian sees a very close connection between man and the whole created world, which he is called to know, and thereby to know himself, and to know the One who created it in this way for man. Lossky gave the following answer to the philosophical thinking that saw this connection of man to the cosmos more like a chance of losing one's self through this connection: on the contrary, Lossky sees a humanization of creation by man's work, who is on the path of deifying his own being through the sanctifying grace of God.

5. That is why he develops a true theology of the "image", which consists in the manifestation of his dignity, freedom and value in all the created ones, since the divine image of man keeps him in a special connection with his Creator, Whose "image" he was created to be.

6. The quality of man as God's "image" cannot be theologically understood without a deepening of the Holy Trinity teaching, and especially without understanding the relationship between being and person from a Trinitarian point of view. On the other hand, as far as understanding the "image", it receives new meanings when approached from the perspective of the Incarnation of God's Eternal Word, Who came into the world to re-emphasize the divine image in man and to renew it, to make it holy, and to restore it, as the whole of humanity too.

7. Vladimir Lossky's thinking on man is a living and profound one and it gives a qualified answer to the reductionist anthropologies of modernity and post modernity. Valorising its profound and bright thinking, the Orthodox theology as well as the mission of the Church in the contemporary world will greatly benefit from the presentation of a vision on man that will keep it from falling or remaining in the vortex of secularization which makes the life of today's man like a desert and empty of meaning.