

LITURGICAL LANGUAGES IN TODAY'S ORTHODOX TRADITION

IVAN DIMITROV

Abstract. The Christian tradition from the first days of its existence used the living word of the gospel. From the event of Pentecost, when the word of faith sounded in the ears of the listeners in their own language, the Church established an important principle: the Heavenly Father gave the apostles of Christ the gift of speaking in different languages, but did not give the multi-lingual pilgrims in Jerusalem the gift of understanding Hebrew. During the 2,000-year history of the Church, Christ's teaching was spread in the language of the respective peoples. But parallel to this, a tendency to use in worship old languages considered "holy" was later noticed. While the truth is that what is sacred is the content of Christian preaching and worship, not the language in which it is offered. To this day, this practice of neglecting the understandable language of the people is observed in some of the local Orthodox churches. And this seriously complicates the work of the Christian mission.

Keywords: Holy Scriptures, Orthodox Church, Orthodox tradition, liturgical texts, liturgical language, three sacred languages, translations, mission.

The concept of liturgical language in the Orthodox tradition is not uniform and the use of at least two languages in the same service is often observed. That is why the plural number is used in the header of this text. But let's start in order.

All humans, as rational creatures of God, use language as a means of communication with each other, and also with God, to whom we turn in our prayers in our native language or in another human language used by us. For our sake and for our salvation, the Son of God became a man and communicated with people in their language in order to convey to them His divine teaching and saving commands. His apostles also preached and wrote their books, preserved in the collection of the New Testament, in the languages they knew and in which they had to communicate with the people of different nationalities, catechized by them.

In the mind that knows Christian theology, the experience of human intellectual efforts and the divine revelation are firmly united in the intelligible world of the tradition of Orthodox reflection. Along the path of Christianity in history, the ancient classical languages have been extremely important – not only as sacred languages of Christian worship, but also, far more, as forms of actual

expression of Christian meanings and ideas, and therefore also as a means of thinking about God and for theology in general.

The ancient Hebrew language was not characterized by the abstract categories inherent in the ancient Greek language and culture. Thanks to the Greek translation of the Holy Scriptures, it became possible to unite two fundamentally different types of cultures: the Middle Eastern (Jewish), with its characteristic existential experience of the relationship to the One God, and the ancient Greek, with its characteristic experience of abstract philosophical thinking. The combination of these two semantic plans, of course, reflects a single truth and foreshadows the Good News of Christ. In this way the main antinomy of the future Christian theology was born: the transcendence of the Absolute and His Presence, i.e. the apophatics and the cataphatics of the Incarnation. God is a transcendent Being. However, remaining an eternal, unknowable, self-sufficient source of life in His existence, He reveals Himself, comes to the one whom He Himself chose and with whom He entered into a Covenant – in order to always be present.¹

These divine acts are accomplished and communicated by means of language in order to be understood and perceived by men. And when we say language, we mean an intelligible language that facilitates the function of the human mind without complicating it and creating ambiguities.

The Christian tradition from the first days of its existence used the living word of the gospel in most cases of the "international" version of the Greek language – Koine (κοινή διάλεκτος). From the event of Pentecost, when the word of faith sounded in the ears of the listeners in their own language, the Church derives an important principle: on that day, the Heavenly Father, having sent the Holy Spirit over the apostles of Christ, gave them the gift of speaking in different languages. He did not give the multilingual pilgrims in Jerusalem the gift of understanding Hebrew as the obligatory liturgical language of the Jerusalem Temple, but on the contrary, he gave the apostles the gift of speaking in different languages. Pilgrims from various nations in Jerusalem listened with amazement to their own language.² Then all baptized peoples from the early Christian era introduced worship in their native language. The missionaries translated into the language of the people enlightened with the truths of the Christian faith, not only the texts of the Holy Scriptures, but also the liturgical books. In this way, a Christian literature of its own was gradually created among the newly converted peoples.

However, this process did not develop smoothly. In contrast to the first centuries of the Christian era, when priority was given to the widest possible spread

¹ АГАФАНГЕЛ (ГАГУА), игумен, „О языке православного богословия и богословии языка” – In: *Богослов.ру* (<https://bogoslov.ru/article/4600113>).

² КОБРИН, М., *О языке богослужения*. Издательство «Украинская нива», Луцк, 1935, с. 14 (published also in Ukrainian: КОБРИН, М. *Про мову богослуження*, Рівне, 2004).

of the Christian faith, another tendency was later noticed. The emergence of many heresies led the Church to approach more carefully the translations and distribution of Christian literature, first of all the Holy Scriptures.

The important thing is that Christianity was never limited to one "sacred" language, although later there was a tendency to admit only three sacred languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin (cf. Luke 23:38). Regardless of whether this was a "trilingual heresy"³ as it is commonly called, or simply a conservative notion of the sanctity of the three languages, there was clearly a similar tendency to neglect the spoken languages of the peoples. This was due to the fact that it was much easier to carry out the mission of the Church in Greek (in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the countries of the second and third planes) or in Latin (in the Western Mediterranean, Central and Western Europe), because they were already translations available in these languages of the Holy Scriptures and of the other liturgical books. Also, the missionaries themselves were usually Greek-speaking or Latin-speaking respectively.

However, the enlightenment of the various peoples could hardly be achieved with the help of these two languages alone, no matter how good the literature compiled in them was. Therefore, translations of the Christian holy books into other languages began to appear already from the 2nd century onwards: Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, etc.

At the end of the 4th century, St. John Chrysostom in Constantinople gave the Goths he enlightened the church "St. Paul", where Christian worship was held in Gothic. A theological school for future Goth priests was established next to the church. St. John himself performed the ordination of these priests. The Goths were his congregation, and he was their bishop, who came to their church and talked to the people with an interpreter.⁴ This is a great example of a pastoral attitude towards the language of an enlightened people. This example shows already in early Byzantium the attitude towards the language of other peoples even within the borders of the empire. That is why the Gothic bishop Ulfila in the second half of the 4th century in the northern lands of Byzantium (or today's lands of Bulgaria) south of the Danube made the Gothic translation of the Bible.

In the case of St. John Chrysostom, it was more logical to act in another way: Constantinople was the capital of the Greek-speaking empire, and the Goths lived there as mercenaries or civil servants. In any case, they should have learned Greek. However, Chrysostom was guided by another principle, that of the triunity of language ability: 1) to listen and understand the text, 2) to speak and express yourself and 3) to think in the categories of this language. It is self-evident for the

³ ŠEVČENKO, Ihor, "Three Paradoxes of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission", *Slavic Review* 23 (2), (1964), p. 220–236.

⁴ THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Historia ecclesiastica* V, 30. PG 82, 1257.

Church fathers that the language of thought and communication must also be the language of worship. And Chrysostom himself (as well as all the fathers and teachers of the Church of that time) does not have any special liturgical language, just as it did not exist among the ancient Jews. The fathers write sermons, communicate with kings and commoners, and celebrate liturgy in the same language. They did not write any treatises in defense of this reality, since it never occurred to anyone to dispute self-evident things. During the first millennium, we find no precedent for a "dominant language" or prayer in ancient languages that have lost clarity and intelligibility to modern people. It was only in the second half of the 9th century that a "theological" current arose among the Greeks and Latins, insisting that one can only pray in one of three languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. This teaching was later called the trilingual heresy. But life itself disproves this baseless theory. Because since ancient times there have been full-fledged liturgical traditions in Syriac, Gothic, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Gaelic, British, Celtic, Ethiopic, Persian (not to mention the countless dialects).

In whatever form this dispute about the three sacred languages existed, it was overcome by the intervention of the Pope Hadrian II, who in Rome duly approved the Slavic liturgy and the use of the Slavic language in it. In the Church literature, the information about the arguments of St. Constantine-Cyril the Philosopher, enlightener of the Slavic nations, against the "trilingual heresy" has remained. He spoke out against the "trilinguals" in Venice, denouncing those clergy who held the theory of the three "holy languages" of Christianity – Hebrew, Latin and Greek. Scholars believe that the speech was offered at a local Church council in Venice, written in Greek and then translated into Slavic and Latin. An excerpt from it was handed down in the Extensive Life of Saint Constantine-Cyril. He responds to the reproaches of those who contested the right to worship and books in the Slavic language. This is how he responds: "Does not God send rain equally to all? Also, doesn't the sun shine on everyone? And don't we all breathe the same air? How are you not ashamed, recognizing only three languages, and commanding all other nations and tribes to be blind and deaf? Explain to me, do you think that God is powerless, that He cannot give (all this), or that He is envious and does not want it?"

Enlightening the Slavic peoples in the Christian faith in their own language is an indisputable merit of the Church in Byzantium. An integral part of Christianization was the translation of the Holy Scriptures into the Old Slavonic language common at that time. The work of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius, after their death and the expulsion of their disciples from Moravia and Pannonia, countries under the jurisdiction of Rome, was preserved in the lands of the recently baptized Bulgarian kingdom. From there it spread to the neighboring Slavic peoples of Serbia and Kievan Rus.

The Slavic language was formed and strengthened precisely in the school of Christianity and under the strong influence of the Greek church language. This was

not only a verbal process, but also the formation of thought. The entire written stock of king Simeon's Bulgaria became accessible to Russian Christian authors in the 11th century and later.⁵

In the following centuries, literary work continued to develop in the churches of the Slavic peoples, and individual Slavic languages with their characteristics gradually began to take shape. Christian authors translated and created original written works, the translation of the Bible was copied and distributed relatively widely. In parallel with this, there is also a process of editing the translations of the Bible and other liturgical books. This process developed in two directions. On the one hand, the development of individual Slavic languages in terms of vocabulary and grammar is taken into account. On the other hand, attempts are made to bring translations closer to the original, abandoning attempts at functional translation and often reverting to a more literary translation.

It can be said that with the beginning of the Ottoman period on the Balkans (late 14th century) in the local Slavic churches, things with the development of the literary language stagnated. Only in the sermons of the Christian clergy is the use of the spoken language noticeable. The situation was similar in the churches of the Russian peoples. A largely artificial form of the Church language, known as the Church-slavonic language, was also created there.

During the Ottoman period in the Church of Constantinople, which encompassed Christians within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, attempts were also made to bring the church language closer to the Greek language of the people. They were clearly caused by the changes that had already begun in Europe with the reforms of the Protestant churches. In his renewal initiatives, Patriarch Kirill I (Lucaris) of Constantinople in the first half of the 17th century advocated the idea of translating all biblical texts into the spoken language following the example of the Protestant churches.

In the first half of the 19th century, Protestant missionaries in the canonical territory of the Patriarchate of Constantinople managed to obtain the consent of some patriarchs to translate the Holy Scriptures or parts thereof into the spoken language of the peoples under the jurisdiction of the patriarchate. But other patriarchs were strongly against this initiative and there were cases of destruction of printed translations.⁶

At the same time in the 19th century, Protestant missionaries sought suitable translators among the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor, commissioned and paid them to make translations of the New Testament, in some cases the entire Bible. This became the reason that the local Orthodox churches themselves,

⁵ Флоровский, Г., *Пути русского богословия*. Париж, 1983, с. 6.

⁶ ΜΠΡΑΤΣΙΩΤΗΣ, Π., *Εισαγωγή εις την Παλαιάν Διαθήκην*. Αθήναι 1937, σ. 637-641.

including the Bulgarian Church, took it upon themselves to make for their believers translations of the Bible in the traditional Byzantine version of its text.

This process does not run smoothly everywhere. The leadership of some of the Orthodox churches opposes the translations of the Bible and other liturgical texts and especially the use of these translations in the worship service. Usually, such a position is occupied by educated theologians and clerics, including bishops, who exercise supreme leadership in the Orthodox Church. Naturally, such people do not take into account the educational level of the masses of believers. There are even calls for everyone to study the ancient liturgical language so that there would be no problem with understanding the texts.

The "Controversy about the Gospels" (in Greek "τα Ευαγγελικά") is a culmination of the so-called language dispute that arose in Greece in the first half of the 19th century with the formation of the new state. It expresses itself in what should be the official, literary language in Greece – whether it should be the language spoken by the people, in which there are many foreign influences (mainly Slavic and Turkish) or should it be close to ancient Greek. The dispute becomes part of the problem of the national identity of the Greeks. The "Controversy about the Gospels" culminated on 8/11/1901, when supporters and opponents of the translation of the New Testament into New Greek language came to bloody clashes, as a result of which 11 people were killed and 70 were injured. The Archbishop of Athens, Procopios, was forced to resign, and the newspaper that published the translation of the Gospel withdrew its circulation and apologized. In 1911, an unprecedented measure was reached: an amendment to the Constitution was adopted (Art. 2, § 2), which stated that the text of the Gospel is immutable, and its transmission in another language model is strictly prohibited without the permission of the Church of Constantinople.⁷

With varying strength and frequency, the question of translation and use of liturgical texts, and above all of the Bible in modern Greek, has been raised periodically over the past century. It is striking that it is not the quality of the translations that is discussed, but the very idea of translations into modern language is rejected.⁸ While in September 2004, the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Church in Athens introduced a trial reading of the biblical readings (the so-called αναγνώσματα, i. e. Paroimia, Apostle and Gospel) in divine services, translated into the spoken Greek language. Unfortunately, in June 2005, this innovation was stopped due to opposition from conservative church circles.

⁷ ΣΤΑΜΑΤΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, Δ., «Τα όρια της μέσης οδού: Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο και Γλωσσικό Ζήτημα στις αρχές του 20ου αιώνα» – In: *Ο Ελληνικός κόσμος ανάμεσα στην εποχή του Διαφωτισμού και στον εικοστό αιώνα*, τ. Β', σ. 287-300.

⁸ The same attitude is observed in other Orthodox churches.

A priest in Greece in the second half of the 20th century translated the main liturgical texts into the spoken Greek language and published them on the Internet⁹, but they are more for personal use and are not used in public worship due to a lack of decision by the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Church.

In the second half of the last century, all liturgical books were translated in the Serbian Orthodox Church and in the Orthodox Church of North Macedonia, and divine services in the spoken languages of the people in these countries were introduced. This happened on an initiative "from below" and with a subsequent decision of the leadership of these churches.

In the Russian Orthodox Church at the end of the 20th century, after the "perestroika", attempts were also made on the initiative "from below" to introduce worship in the spoken Russian language instead of Church Slavonic.¹⁰ But very soon there was a reaction with a ban from the church leadership under threat of deposing of the clerics. Nevertheless, translations of the liturgical books were published on the Internet for private use of the faithful. It seems that the interest in these translations is great.¹¹

In the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine, recently there is also a tendency to use the Ukrainian language in divine services, although the situation there is too complicated for political reasons.¹²

In the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, services continue to be conducted primarily in Church Slavonic, although the books used by the clerics were translated decades ago into modern Bulgarian. The readings from the Bible have been read in Bulgarian since 1925, when the translation of the Bible into Bulgarian was printed, made by order of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Church. The situation is more complicated with the books for the church singers, whose texts are many times longer than those of clerics. There is no ban on using the spoken language, on the contrary. At

⁹ Priest Pavlos Kosadzis (1935-2020) from the town of Nigrita in Northern Greece. His entire translation work is available at: <https://www.ymnologia.gr/index.php>

¹⁰ It is worth noting what Professor Archpriest John Meyendorff said decades ago: "The modern church authority requires the proposed translations for review. This is understandable – the hierarchy wants to be responsible for the quality of the translations. But still all liturgical changes must grow "from below" up - from the parishes to the dioceses, from the dioceses to the local church. And it is important to remember that there can be no definitive translation. Words get old and are replaced by others... Words lose their luster. Language is a living organism, and after life comes death. When translators begin their work, piety and learning merge into a holy union." (КОГАН, Д., „Библейский перевод с эпохи ранней Церкви до XX века” – In: *Мир Библии*, 3, 1995, с. 100-101).

¹¹ They are available here: <https://azbyka.ru/bogoslužhenie/>

¹² As is known, there are now two Orthodox churches that claim canonicity and do not communicate with each other. Each one of them is recognized by a different part of the other Orthodox churches, which creates great difficulties in Eucharistic communion.

the Fourth Church-People's Assembly (the supreme governing body of the Bulgarian Church) in 1997, a decision was made to encourage worship in the modern Bulgarian language. However, to this day, in the parish churches in Bulgaria, the service is often in the Church Slavonic language, which is difficult for modern Bulgarians to understand, especially for the younger ones.

In the last 20 years, translations of some of the liturgical books (with a total volume of several thousand pages) were printed in Bulgaria. They do not have the approval of the leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, but are still used in many parish churches. At the same time, a priest of his own initiative published on the Internet his translations of the texts from the vespers and matins services for the Sundays (in the eight tones) and for major holidays. His translations are also used, although without official approval, because people of faith long to listen to services in modern Bulgarian.¹³

In the Orthodox churches of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a dual practice has been observed in recent decades: Church (old)Slavonic is used, but in parallel with it, the language of the respective people.

In the Americas (North and South) due to the variety of national jurisdictions with their traditions, there is a great diversity in the use of the ancient languages (Greek, Slavonic etc.) alongside English. There are also numerous Orthodox communities that consist of converted local residents and they use the modern language (English, French, Spanish).

Things are much better in a number of Orthodox churches, where the modern language of the people is used for worship. These are:

- Patriarchate of Antioch (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Hatay region in Turkey, etc.) – Arabic language;
- Romanian Orthodox Church – Romanian language;¹⁴
- Georgian Orthodox Church – Georgian;
- Albanian Orthodox Church – Albanian and Byzantine Greek (in some parishes);
- Finnish Orthodox Church – Finnish language.

Local modern languages are used even in the small Korean Orthodox Church, in the African parishes of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, in the Arab

¹³ This is priest Trayan Goranov, who has been living, working and serving in Great Britain for 12 years. See about him (in Bulgarian):

https://dveri.bg/component/com_content/Itemid,100658/catid,120/id,70412/view,article/

¹⁴ See also the interview with the priest Dr. Ioan Goje from the church "Sfântul Dumitru" in Cluj, Romania, who spoke on this topic (in Bulgarian):

https://dveri.bg/component/com_content/Itemid,48/catid,27/id,72362/view,article/

parishes of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (on the territory of Israel, Palestine, Jordan).

This cursory overview of the state of the use of liturgical languages in the Orthodox churches, although not exhaustive, gives an idea of the very colorful picture of the situation.

And to put it briefly, the Orthodox churches are lagging behind in the modernization of the liturgical language, this most important means of their preaching, which is part of the command of Jesus Christ to His disciples: "Go, *teach* all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mat. 28:19-20). As already mentioned, this is due to the conservatism first of all of the clergy, especially the bishops, and secondly to the conservatism of a certain part of the faithful themselves. All these retrograde people present the ancient (sometimes 2000 years behind) language as some kind of "sacred cow" that should not be touched. In the minds of most Orthodox Christians from the Slavic peoples, e.g. the language of the ancient Slavs has become a kind of fetish – an inviolable and unchanging cultural heritage. Its status is supported by the quasi-scientific mythology of the supposedly primordial "artifice" of the Slavic language, created "exclusively for sacred purposes"¹⁵. It may be said that zealous supporters of the Slavonic text in worship echo the negative attitude of the Palestinian Jews towards the Alexandrian Greek translation known as the Septuagint. But then it was all about preserving the text of the original, and here it is about the importance of one translation compared to another.

In the words of a notable scholar of the last century, "if worship is perceived as music that creates a 'mood' but means nothing and obligates nothing, it is not only unnecessary, but even criminal to leave worship in that form".¹⁶

Claims of the sanctity of the ancient liturgical languages in contrast to the modern ones, which were not "pious", do not stand up to criticism. Language, especially literary language, is something created by humans. It is up to them whether it will be pious or not. In this sense, to lightly define a living language with a thousand-year written tradition as unfit for church use is irresponsible to say the least. On our shoulders rests the burden of our modern language being ennobled and elevated to the truths of Revelation.¹⁷

¹⁵ ФЕОГНОСТ (ПУШКОВ), архим., „Нужны ли Православной Церкви ‚священные коровы‘? (к вопросу о богослужебном языке)” – *Ип: Церковь и время*, 60 (3), 2012, p. 39.

¹⁶ АВЕРИНЦЕВ, С., „О языке Литургии” – *Ип: Язык Церкви*, 1, 1997, с. 11.

¹⁷ ПЕТРОВ, Свещ. Петър, „Църковният език”. – *Ип: Живо предание*. <https://dveri.bg/ywpy>

IVAN DIMITROV

And the more we neglect this necessity, the more we move away from the mission of evangelizers.

Ivan DIMITROV
St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University
Sofia, Bulgaria

Bibliography

- ŠEVČENKO, Ihor, “Three Paradoxes of the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission”, *Slavic Review* 23 (2), (1964), p. 220–236.
- THEODORETUS CYRENSIS, *Historia ecclesiastica* V, 30. PG 82, 1257.5.
- ΜΠΡΑΤΣΙΩΤΗΣ, Π., *Εισαγωγή εις την Παλαιάν Διαθήκην*. Αθήναι 1937, σ. 637-641.
- ΣΤΑΜΑΤΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, Δ., «Τα όρια της μέσης οδού: Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο και Γλωσσικό Ζήτημα στις αρχές του 20ου αιώνα». *Ο Ελληνικός κόσμος ανάμεσα στην εποχή του Διαφωτισμού και στον εικοστό αιώνα*, τ. Β', σ. 287-300.
- АВЕРИНЦЕВ, С., „О языке Литургии”. *Язык Церкви*, 1, 1997, с. 11.
- ΑΓΑΦΑΝΓΕΛ (ΓΑΓΥΑ), игумен, „Ο языке православного богословия и богословии языка”. *Богослов.ру* (<https://bogoslav.ru/article/4600113>).
- КОБРИН, М., *О языке богослужения*. Издательство «Украинская нива», Луцк, 1935, с. 14 (published also in Ukrainian: КОБРИН, М., *Про мову богослужения*, Рівне, 2004).
- КОГАН, Д., „Библейский перевод с эпохи ранней Церкви до XX века”. *Мир Библии*, 3, 1995, с. 100-101.
- ΠΕΤΡΟΒ, Свещ. Петър, „Църковният език”. *Живо предание*. <https://dveri.bg/ywpy>
- ΦΕΟΓΝΟΣΤ (ΠΟΥΣΚΟΒ), архим., „Нужны ли Православной Церкви ,священные коровы’? (к вопросу о богослужебном языке)”. *Церковь и время*, 60 (3), 2012, p. 39.
- ФЛОРОВСКИЙ, Г., *Пути русского богословия*. Париж, 1983, с. 6.