

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IN PAUL EVDOKIMOV'S PERSPECTIVE

ADRIAN EUGEN TRUȚĂ*

ABSTRACT. This article comprises the contributions and the original expressions/formulations of the Russian theologian Paul Evdokimov in his efforts to present the essence of the mystical life within the eastern tradition. The current study gathers explanations related to apophatic theology, *epektasis*, the knowledge of God, the mystical experience and the integration of culture in the ecclesiastical understanding.

Keywords: Paul Evdokimov, mystical experience, Orthodox theology.

The present article tries to comprise the theological expressions resulted from the main directions of mystical experience in orthodoxy, in the manner they were perceived by the erudite theologian Paul Evdokimov, a prominent member of the Russian intelligentsia in Diaspora. The novelty of this study consists of a progressive and logical inclusion of the traits that characterize the experience of God within the space of eastern Christianity in the way they were portrayed over time by the mentioned theologian.

The analysis that is primarily centred on the ecstatic experiences of the spiritual life should not be considered a neo-protestant approach (harismatic/pentecostal) to faith development. These experiences have their origin in the mystical life of the Church, though the eastern tradition has never made a clear distinction between the dogma confessed by the Church - "theology"- and the personal experience of the sacraments of the Church - "mysticism". "The theology is mystical and the mystical life is theological: this is the culmination of theology, theology par-excellence, the contemplation of the Holy Trinity"¹

Evdokimov adds to the icon of the Russian Christianity an innate mysticism of the absolute, yet born from the founding moments of the nation and the faith,

* PhD Candidate, Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
E-mail: evghenios88@gmail.com.

¹ Paul Evdokimov, *Cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu în tradiția răsăriteană*, trans. Vasile Răducă (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013), 159.

among which the most important is the conversion of Prince Vladimir and the entire Russia followed by the abrogation of the death penalty, “an extreme act for that epoch”² and an extensive social reform centred on Christian philanthropy.

We should also mention here the Testament of Vladimir Monomakh and the canonization of the first two Russian saints, Boris and Gleb. A first mention of their celebration was made on 24th July 1093, when they offered themselves as martyrs who died a violent death after refusing the fratricid fight between them and their armies³.

These actions organically give birth to a mystical characteristic of the Russian soul, which creates a certain apophatism: “Orthodoxy has no need to formulate, it has the need not to formulate”⁴, something that is found in the contemplativeness of Andrei Rubliov and in the foundation with the patron saint of the Holy Trinity of Saint Serghie of Radonej⁵. The anamnesis of this truth appears in the words of the Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow: “The creed is not yours as long as you have not experienced it”⁶.

Overall, we notice in Evdokimov a permanent reference to an extensive patristic bibliography which allows him an authentic theological evolution, deprived of any dogmatical schematism. We therefore mention the freshness of a dialogue between the Holy Scripture and the *men of note* of the Scripture which summarises the Christian experience.

Thus, the spiritual life develops on three directions: human, evil and God-like. Every choice or deed is part of one of the above categories. One of the benefits obtained from the Russian Orthodox theologians who lived in the Western Europe was the ability to make a comparison between the two types of spirituality divided by time and space. Incorrectly termed as mystical experience by Paul Edvokimov, the life of orthodoxy is in fact the life of orthopraxy. “Orthodoxy speaks of participation, spiritual advance in life and *theosis*. But if a mystic is always an ascetic, then isn’t an ascetic always a mystic as well?”⁷

A statement that deserves detailed analysis describes an antinomic and dialectical relation between God and man, in which the man’s salutary efforts to know God are not salutary from the viewpoint of an autonomous will directed to God, but through co-participation, thus only God’s work in us can be salutary.

² Paul Evdokimov, *Hristos în gândirea rusă*, trans. Ion Buga (Bucharest: Editura Symbol, 2001), 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Paul Evdokimov, *Orthodoxia*, trans. Irineu Ioan Popa (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996), 118.

Regarded from a certain perspective, this statement seems to be the beginning of an argumentation in favour of pantheism rather than of an apology of a Christian kind. The interaction between grace and sin neither disappears nor appears in the absolute superhuman as only the Embodiment offers the human being the possibility to discover something both humanlike and divine, that is a spiritual-human union, simultaneous and distinctive in manifestation, offering infinite possibilities, indescribable at the same time. That is why, "if we have to save something in this world, it should not be necessary the human, but God's love because He loved us first"⁸

The experience of this love can be understood in Orthodoxy through a pneumatology that aligns the mysteries of an eastern triadocentrism in which it is not the contemplated power that dominates the spirituality, but the source of life that supports the mysteries of the ecclesiastical and personal life. As far as the participant to the religious life succeeds in transferring the mystery of his personal life to his community life then deification is achieved. This transfer is made under the auspices of divine instinct, called to arise life-giving grace. This is what Saint Gregory of Nyssa describes in "Life of Moses", talking about the three ages of the spiritual life: God showed Himself to Moses in light (διὰ φωτός); then He talked to him in the cloud (διὰ νέφελης); finally, when Moses became faultless, he contemplated God in darkness (ἐν γνόφῳ τὸν Θεὸν βλέπει)⁹

This is the main focus for us: the epektasis¹⁰. Through cleanliness towards contemplation in darkness, Evdokimov observes the unitary, inexpressible and transdiscursive¹¹ characteristic of spiritual life in the excellence of its ultimate forms, in the climax of the dialogue between God and man. Iconosofia can be regarded as a form of this process, as well, because it gives rise to teognosia, through the understanding of the invisible that appears to be in the visible of the iconic representation, devoid of the blushing of the human emotions and full of the absence of darkness of Byzantine eternalized long faces. In the past, the crowds went in the wilderness to contemplate the Stylites, "to engrave in their memories the power of spirit over matter [...]; then they came back with clumsy

⁸ Ibid., 119.

⁹ Sfântul Grigorie de Nyssa, *Scieri. Partea Întâia*, trans. Dumitru Stăniloae, and Ioan Buga (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1982).

¹⁰ This word summarizes the aspects of ekstasis and enstasis by the fact that "the soul is out of itself towards Another one and the Other one makes His place in the soul, being more innermost for the soul than the man's soul itself. Which explains the paradoxical expression: "To find God is to continually seek for Him", "The Man moves forward just for the fact that he stopped". Paul Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, trans. Gabriela Moldoveanu (Bucharest: Editura Sophia, 2015).

¹¹ Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, 120.

drawings, prototypes of icons to recall the greatness that man can reach"¹² Only in the iconic sobriety of the prolonged bodies and intentionally darkened faces was the sensual and mystical erotism¹³ specific to other religious spaces dismissed. That is why the Veneration of the Cross in the East does not mean the worship of the wood meant for torture, but the revelation of the Tree of Life that grows from Paradise.

The Russian theologian notes: "As the purpose of this ascent is *Θεωρία τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος*, the mysticism of the light accomplishes itself in the mysticism of the darkness, gnosis in super-gnosis"¹⁴

The truth reiterated by Saint Isaac the Syrian remains more important, and it states that the *vision* of God in any tangible form represents the vision of our own imaginings. This understanding does not suppress faith, but it will never be a direct or real understanding¹⁵.

This way of thinking endorses the apophatism, knowledge through ignorance and it proves the impossibility of the human being to know the essence of God, Who in His divine mercy gives us the over-bright darkness as a point of receptivity and approach. The closer God is to us, the darker he is, concludes Evdokimov¹⁶. This fact allows us to make an exercise of intimacy: something that we want through His initiative, seconded by our will, God is known more through the darkness of the absence than through the light of the certainty or the feeling. Thus, "the ekstasis through «one's self rapture» is once again reunited with the enstasis (staying into one's self) which makes the mystic give up himself and trust himself to God"¹⁷.

This gives one the powerful sensation that knowing God culminates with total silence. The intelligence is mute. The sensation is interrupted. "The theognosis prevails over Eros, but this theognosis cannot be explained. It happens and the amazement springs from the soul"¹⁸

Beyond-knowledge is denied knowledge offered from God's transcendence that obscures the light but Whose immanence creates deification. It is Evdokimov who notices that the Embodiment opens the Eucharist as intimate implication towards the acquisition of grace, without the latter to conduct special categories.¹⁹

¹² Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, 108.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁴ Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁸ Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, 124.

¹⁹ Due to this reality of grace, our doubt is related to the affiliation of certain saints to certain specific social vocations: will the patron saint of children drastically oppose to the patron saint of the army when it bombards civilians and children, only to win a war? Unwillingly, we use the instruments of an ideological fight between saints and we approach the ridiculous.

These two latter realities, of direct knowledge of comprehensibility and of divine presence turn the mystical union into a point of convergence of mutual relations between God and man. The theologian adopted by the Western World states that "the soul entirely fulfills its destiny only by surpassing itself towards the Other one" in a synthesis that "keeps its own antinomy"²⁰. He compares the western mysticism to the eastern one, reminding us that the latter helps us to know God through God, in contrast to the Latin one that identifies a direct relation between the soul and God²¹, devoid of the liberating antinomy of the patristic spirit.

The problem extends to the outside exposure of the faith, creating thus a conflict between the contemplative state (specific for the Easterners) and the western activism, translated into different social and cultural developments.²²

However, the mystical eros is structured by the dogma. "Apart from the Church, there is no mystical life. The mystical life reaches the peak of freedom, but inwardly it is supported by the dogma experienced in the Mysteries"²³, which entails distancing from the disorganised psychisms of denominations. Christification is not a procedure of sensual or mental imitation; it is the intimate connection with Christ through the Holy Spirit. This explains the lack of stigma in the Eastern spirituality and which proves a mental understanding of the imitation of Christ. Following Christ implies becoming a *Christophore* and at the same time a *pneumatophore*.

The experience of God is not just about the feeling of His suffering humanity, as it is emblematically portrayed in the western mysticism, in some saints' autobiographies or memories. It is the Resurrection and not the Crucifixion that crowns the world, and the Resurrection begins by entering the sealed tomb from which eternal life springs. The thorny issue is the removal of any lyricism which threatens a Christian's spiritual life. It is one of the reasons that justify the abandonment of art, for example, namely Sophrony Sakharov's painting, out of the desire to connect directly and antinomically to the energy of the grace of the Holy Spirit. In mysticism, art is not a direct means of approaching God, as it is the direct impediment of His discovery.

The mystical prayer by excellence (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner) confesses the Holy Trinity, the Embodiment and the abyss

²⁰ Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The charge of notoriety that Orthodoxy slows down the development of civilization as opposed to the creative activism of western Latinity can be solved by appealing to the memory of the history: a thousand years ago, the situation was exactly the opposite; the East was the tip of the creative civilization while the West delayed its cultural improvement.

²³ Evdokimov, *Ortodoxia*, 125.

from which the mystique invokes the life-giving spirit. It is inaccurate to call it invocation as the Holy Spirit is the one that prays within us with unspoken sighs, to paraphrase a biblical quote. Thus, we discover the theophanic aspect of the prayer of the heart that balances in the present of the Lord the meaning of life and death.

That is why, the ekstasis, as a sign of mystical state, is considered by Saint Symeon the New Theologian as an “occupation of the novices and not of those consummate” (P.G., 143, 401B). Even more interesting is the remark made by Saint John of Lycopolis who said that performing miracles is not an action of the spirit but of the psyche. (“*Orientalia Christiana*”, 120, 1939, p. 35).

Moreover, living in God is not an over-survival; it is a natural wish for life, more natural than the ordinary and its naturalness. “He comes unexpectedly and, without mingling, He mingles with me... My hands are the hands of a miserable, but when I move my hand, it is all Christ” (Hymns of divine love). The hymn is similar to the pauline expression “I know a man in Christ” (II Cor. 12,2) and which throws us into confusion as we inevitably compare it either to the Symeon’s quote on ekstasis which interests only the novices or the biblical passage presenting a man who was caught up to the third heaven, an episode from St. Apostle Paul’s spiritual biography.

The Russian theologian reckons that “the rapture is nothing but personal grace, at all indispensable and never searched”²⁴, and it is much more important to keep in our spiritual memory the expression “I know a man *in* Christ” as one that describes the quintessence of Christian life and which through the Sacrament of Baptism inaugurates sacramental mysticism: “nobody is a mystic without Eucharist”²⁵. At the same time, Evdokimov patristically argues for the ages of spiritual becoming: “Baby Jesus grows up under different images, following each measure, He manifests as a child, as a teenager or as a grown-up” (Sf. Grigore de Nyssa- In Cant. Or. III, P.G. 44, 828) based on the passages: “that Christ is formed in you” (Gal. 4,19), “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, as we mature to the full measure of the stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4,13).

In other words, each person’s spiritual journey is related to the intimate discovery of our Christ the Saviour’s spiritual age. It might be the case that as grown-ups we discover Christ only as an adolescent. Where can we place mystical ekstasis on this ladder of self-discovery through Christ discovery? The authentic anthropology is that of divine-humanity Embodiment of Christ, but where exactly is the place of mystical ekstasis in this Christian anthropology?

²⁴ Paul Evdokimov, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, trans. Ion Buga (Bucharest: Asociația filantropică medicală creștină CHRISTIANA, 1993), 210.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

One of the traits of advancing on the path of discovering Christ is the discovery of liturgical dimension of history²⁶ in which every doxology “redeems time” (Ef. 5,16) revealing the eternity of present and its deeds and suppressing the burden of temporal fragmentation, meaning death. “The man of the history lives out of time”²⁷, he feels and chooses that everything he does this moment, the man that he meets right now to be more important, unlike the man who wants “to kill time” and solve his problems in the future or past on whose frontispiece it is written *Escape*.

The spiritual man does not escape, he knows that what seems to be a carceral regime is the antechamber of Christic entirety in which the scent of the life-giving spirit feels extremely real. “The liturgical liberation from the oppression of times, oppression caused by its non-existing dimensions gives rise to the presence of divine in man and allows him to acknowledge it”²⁸. This explains why Mary Magdalene does not recognise Christ after His Resurrection: she was looking for the image she had inside her and thus she could not recognise the Risen Lord. It is also the case with the two apostles on the road to Emmaus, or our situation at turning points and rebirth.

We can conclude that at least one type of self-liberation is the liberation from the past and admission into the liturgical time, of the eternity of the present that intimately discovers the true liberation: God’s entry in us. This may be the red line of our effort: the mystic ekstasis or God’s entry. The more we liberate ourselves, the more we receive God in ourselves. The more we leave ourselves, the more we discover Christ; the more our liberation feels like a rapture, the freer we are to attract Christ in ourselves and to become divine through grace – because we forced God to live within us; the more we force Him to come, the more He comes with His goodness and thus we understand the mystery that never leaving ourselves we have not abandoned the essence of our being and, at the same time, our complete receiving of God in ourselves does not deny us our ordinary characteristic.

Another trait of the spiritual life is the contemplation of the inexpressible, when the light can be seen as both object and means of vision²⁹ as the Scripture testifies about Moses, about the Holy Tabernacle, the Holy Transfiguration, the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the conversion of St. Ap. Paul and in Revelation. There is an inextricable connection between the Tabor light and the Parousia light and the light of the future. In the same way, “the nimbus of the saints in iconography

²⁶ Ibid., 211.

²⁷ Ibid., 212.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 215.

reveal the luminosity of their bodies as an ontological natural state³⁰ in an anticipation that includes the realities of Parousia. Even the angels live ecstatically the light of the King of Glory as the sheep becomes one with the Shepherd³¹.

The Russian theologian notes that “the mystic soul expands and spreads in a cosmic love, it assumes the universal evil, goes through the agony of Gethsemane and arrives at another view that surpasses any judgement”³² that all men are good and worth loving. This motion of the soul does not signify abstinence or sweetness of grace, but the shift from fear to love (I In. 4,18), in which the shadow is light, drunkenness is sober, the fountain has living water (flowing) and the movement is still. “The multiple of gnosis makes room for uniqueness and simplicity”³³.

Moving the centre of gravity of our analysis towards some brief remarks that accompany the representatives of the neo-patristic theology as Evdokimov perceived them, he notes in the theology of Father Gheorghe Florovski a determination to return from the classroom to the altar³⁴, where the economy of the Embodiment of Christ restores the body of Christ, that is the Church. “His judgements are severe and often unjust”³⁵, he concludes. Vladimir Lossky is part of a first remarkable attempt of neo-patristic synthesis³⁶, while Olivier Clement enriches the thinking of his magister (Lossky)³⁷.

Father Jean Meyendorff and Father Alexander Schmemmann produce a collection of articles on the *Primacy of Peter in the Orthodox Church*³⁸ on the life of the Spirit in the Church confessing the truth of ecumenicity and veracity of a synod. Antonie Kartaciov makes an integrative statement: “Any negation, any refusal of social and political duty is a Monophysite heresy, ignorance of the human nature of Christ, a sin against Incarnation”³⁹ with an immediate consequence that the Christian faith cannot accept any totalitarian regime, or any neutral position⁴⁰ of secularism.

Bishop Cassian Bezobrazov addresses these socio-theological theses considering that any initiative to create a state according to evangelical

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, 128.

³² Evdokimov, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, 215-216.

³³ Evdokimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, 127.

³⁴ Evdokimov, *Hristos în gândirea rusă*, 229.

³⁵ Ibid., 230.

³⁶ Ibid., 231-233.

³⁷ Ibid., 230.

³⁸ Ibid., 234.

³⁹ Ibid., 236.

⁴⁰ Neutral at least declaratively, as any option is the option of subjectivity and not that of objectivity of knowledge and action.

laws is doomed to fail, thus rather opting for a permanent testimony like that of Martyrs⁴¹. Equally realistic is his perspective on biblical hermeneutics and inspiration of the texts of the Sacred Scripture so that “those who do not believe in the Resurrection of Christ as it is lived in the Church, found in the Liturgy, proclaimed in the Creed, will never be able to properly read the Bible”⁴².

When others write about Paul Evdokimov, they recognise in him the providence of the integration of human culture in ecclesiastical understanding, like the overthrow of Jung's statement who saw in Christ the image of the Self in the more specific enunciation to the eastern mysticism, that the Self is the image of God. The requirement of a state of psycho-synthesis in the Holy Spirit targets the integration of every being in the light⁴³; thus the symbolic understanding of the eschatological revelation of the feminine is born in which the Spirit and the discovery of the “viscera of the forgiveness”⁴⁴ of God move cvasi-feminine, consoling, revealing, embodied⁴⁵. This will be mostly seen in *Woman and the Salvation of the world* when he uses the psychological concept of archetype and other terms formulated by Jung.

What we overall attempted to do in this study was to gradually describe the points that identify the exceptional mystic experience in the Christian East, selecting the statements that contain the differentiating nuances of the Orthodox faith. The entire effort was animated by a dialogic perspective between the Revelation and the cultural reception, Evdokimov proposing a re-foundation of civilisation through a liturgical experience of the historic time.

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⁴¹ Evdokimov, *Hristos în gândirea rusă*, 237.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 239-240.

⁴³ Olivier Clément, *Orient-Occident. Deux passeurs: Vladimir Lossky et Paul Evdokimov*, Labor et Fides 1, rue Beauregard, CH-1204, (Genève, 1985), 125.

⁴⁴ In original: „des entrailles de miséricorde”.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

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