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- abstract -

THE AXIOLOGY OF GOOD AND EVIL IN CLASSICAL GREEK PATRISTIC THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

In this work I have gathered the beauty of patristic thought about Good and Evil. Due to their spiritual formation and the divine inspiration that guided them, the Holy Fathers transformed Christian teaching from theory into life and from speculation into doxology. Throughout their teaching, the Holy Fathers contributed to a good explanation of God's goodness and love over His creation. In addition to the vast culture and deep piety, they combined the contemplative life with the active one, becoming living and immortal models of those who orient their souls towards the perfect Good.

According to Christian teaching, evil has entered our world as a result of the fall of Satan, so it has a personal character. Although Satan is the initiator of evil, people are responsible for spreading it in our world through sin. Thus, we are not innocent victims without any responsibility. By abusing the freedom of choice that God has given us, we have become the perpetrators of evil in our world. Although we have real freedom to refuse evil, we do not, evil continues to spread. The reason God allows this situation and does not extinguish all evil in an instant is that such an act would necessarily involve the damnation of all who do it. This would

nullify any possibility for them to repent and be reconciled to God. To the extent that God wants sinners to "turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 33:11), a sudden disappearance of evil would contradict His love for mankind.

In the perspective of an ideal society, people's attitude toward evil should not be one of resignation or rebellion against God, but of conscious and responsible participation in structuring the good of the world. We are required to fight continually against evil and suffering, and especially against our sinful nature.

In order to be in communion with God we must seek the Good, strive for Him and enter into communion with Him: "Seek good and not evil, that you may be alive, and so the Lord God of hosts will be with you as you say he is" (Am. 5, 14). We must always turn to the Supreme Good, to the Savior Jesus Christ, this must be our ultimate goal. Our formation according to the divine model orients us towards the accomplishment and fulfillment of the good to which we are called, "Behold, today I have set before you life and death, good and evil" (Deut. 30:15).

In synthesizing the patristic teaching on the axiology of good and evil, I structured my doctoral dissertation into six main chapters:

In the first chapter, entitled "Goodness and Love. The Holy Trinity - the primordial model of human nature", I presented the way in which for patristic thought and contemporary orthodox theology the Holy Trinity constitutes the Supreme Good, developing this preliminary part of the doctoral thesis in the following subchapters: "Discovering the Supreme Good", "Created Being - image of divine love", "Fall from love" and "the saving Opening of the Trinity in Christ".

After this first chapter, in which the general patristic and contemporary frames of the treated subject are captured, we developed a study dedicated to "The problem of evil and sin". This second chapter of the thesis wanted me to constitute a detailed analysis and synthesis of classical patristic thinking on the origin, existence and nature of evil and sin. We dealt, in turn, with the fundamental landmarks of the thinking of the Holy Fathers on the chosen research topic: "Nature of evil", "Origin and typology of evil", "Evil and demons", "Evil and sin in a post-patristic and contemporary perspective", "Evil, suffering, death", dedicating four subchapters to the analysis of the works of several patristic authors representative for the researched theme: Origen, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa.

The third chapter of the paper, entitled "Between good and evil - the issue of human freedom", is a synthetic approach to the theme of human freedom in patristic thinking, extending my analysis of both the precedents of this concept in Greek philosophy and subsequent developments. in the Eastern and Western evolutions of Christian theology in this regard.

The fourth chapter concerns the existential framework of the "spiritual struggle and the path of healing from evil." In this part of the paper we focused on the biblical and patristic issues of the conscience of sin, repentance, vigilance, spiritual warfare, as well as asceticism and purification of passions.

The work continues with the practical extension of "Doing Good", a chapter in which we insisted on the importance of philanthropy and good deeds, emphasizing that without the manifestation of love for others there can be no real growth of man for good and in relationship with God.

"The good and the finality of deification" is the final chapter of the thesis, dealing with the idea of good in the perspective of the purpose of human existence - deification. As in the previous chapters, in addition to the representative patristic works, we also resorted to modern and

contemporary theological literature, emphasizing the relevance of patristic thinking for the present times in which we live.

In this approach, the methodological, theoretical and scientific support is determined by existing research in this field, good and evil being issues debated over time. The intended contribution consists in a synthesis study focused on the relevance of patristic thinking in the present world, marked by a relativization of traditional values, a continuous secularization or desacralization, a limitation of the concepts of good and evil at the level of an individualistic scale of values.

We are aware that the subject of the axiology of good and evil in Greek patristic thought is far too broad to be exhausted in these pages. Given the wide coverage of this topic and the limited space of this paper, many significant topics are summarized. Definitely, it is not a work about all aspects of the relationship between good and evil.

The central objective or purpose of this thesis is to make an organized synthesis of the essential concepts that Revelation, the writings of the Holy Fathers and tangentially philosophy and ethics, in all their aspects, provide us with about the moral structure of the world and God's relationship

with the world. and with the man. We will start in the realization of this thesis from the date of Revelation regarding the origin of good and evil, with a wide incursion in the writings of the Holy Fathers and with brief references to recent philosophical theories on this topic.

To this end, we have found it appropriate to contribute effectively to the clarification of sensitive issues from a theological and philosophical point of view, thus referring not only to general issues in the patristic field, already known, but to the problems and turmoil of modern man. , in relation to the topic proposed for the study.

The patristic perspective I proposed in approaching this subject undoubtedly involves the combination of biblical and scientific research methods, but keeping the dogmatic framework of the teaching of faith established by the sources of Christianity and, of course, the demands of theological research work.

Regarding the bibliographic sources used, we tried to capitalize on the Romanian bibliography, but also the studies and researches from abroad, which provided us with rich and very valuable information. We have, of course, had to take on many theories, formulated and asserted by others, long before us, throughout Christian history, conforming to the

customs of scientific work, but we have also tried to make these statements accessible to the power. understanding of man in the third millennium.

I considered necessary this complex analysis, which involves the simultaneous connection of biblical theology with patristic and philosophical thinking, on the one hand due to the lack of such a synthesis, on the other hand due to the secularizing crisis that is increasingly moving towards the dilution of the human being in a virtual, media reality, excessively technicalized, in which not only God loses his name, but also man. Without claiming to be exhaustive on the subject, I will finally draw general conclusions that will reflect my personal opinion and vision on the vital importance of awareness of evil and the planting of good in the life of the Christian today.

The last chapter of the paper sought a return to the deifying paradigm of classical patristic theology. In addition to patristic literature, we analyzed various works representative of recent philosophy, contextualizing the effort to return to patristic sources in the broader intellectual framework of contemporary culture. The proposed radiography required not only the comparison of philosophical models with the theological one, but followed

the practical extension of all these considerations, in an attempt to provide a current answer to the various identity dilemmas of today's man.

The bibliographic sources consisted of biblical critique works, patristic works, the wider literature related to the issue of good and evil, as well as philosophical and literary works. In addition to the materials available in Romanian, we have identified a rich bibliography, current, in English and French.

*

The conclusions that patristic images offer us about the magnifying glass of evil and sin are decisive for the Christian spiritual life. Christianity cannot be understood without this spiritual effort of healing evil. The Christian's life is a continual struggle with sin. For this, both sin and evil must be realized and viewed in their deep and pressing reality.

Man's effort is of course supported by the component of grace, by the help of God. But this help is always offered to human freedom. As Fr. Prof. I.G. Coman, "God allows evil to make the function of freedom possible. The indulgence of evil is tantamount to the suppression of freedom. And the suppression of freedom means the collapse of man into non-existence, which God does not admit because he is the author

of existence. Without freedom, neither virtue, nor perfection, nor salvation is possible."¹

The soul can find its happiness only by overcoming evil freely, confronting its hideous reality. Evil appears to us as a work of freedom, and thus the possibility is opened of liberation, of salvation from it. The impossible thing in a vision that either links evil to the substance of things or ignores its possibilities.

The conception of evil has the gift of raising awareness of the main adversary of existence. The presence of demons in the rhythm of our world is an element that must be realized and taken seriously. All the more so as this aspect looks towards a reality of the soul beyond death, the existence here. "All wickedness and unclean passions have been invented by them. They were allowed to tempt man, but they did not have the power to force anyone. For we have the power to receive temptation or not to receive it. For this reason he prepared for the devil and his demons and those who follow him, the unquenchable fire and eternal punishment."²

¹ Pr. Ioan G. Coman, *Dumnezeu nu este autor al răului*, în „ST”, V (1953), no. 1-2, p. 47.

² St. Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, trans. Pr. D. Fecioru, Edit. Scripta, București, 1993, p. 50.

The life of the world we live in can often become a land of evil and demons. Nowhere is evil more present than in the daily ignorance in which the world trains us. We could even say, related to this aspect, together with Denis de Rougement, that "the proof that the devil exists, acts and succeeds consists precisely in the fact that we no longer believe in him."³

In a despiritualized world, in which we no longer see beyond our own limitations, in which "Hell is the others" - in Sartre's words - a Christian will have to say, according to Paul Evdokimov: "the destiny of others is my hell".

Assuming hell and pain for others is most eloquently embodied in the experience of the saints: "Probably the most powerful weapon against evil is the prayer of a saint and that the destiny of hell also depends on the love of the saints. Man prepares his own inferno by closing himself to divine love, which alone remains unchanged."⁴

In this plan of the spiritual life, last but not least, one can raise, of course, the question of the destiny of hell and evil in general. Are these endless, eternal? The risk of such

³ Denis de Rougement, *Partea diavolului*, trans. Mircea Ivănescu, Edit. Anastasia, București, 1994, p. 36.

⁴ Paul Evdokimov, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, trans. Pr. Ion Buga, Edit. Christiana, București, 1993, p. 84.

speculation has been felt not infrequently in the history of Christian thought. On the other hand, we often encounter the image of saints who can only pray for the salvation of the entire universe, including demons.

I conclude these findings with an image, perhaps paradoxical, that one of the quoted theologians offers us: "Despair, even infernal, is nourished by a hope that it contains and therefore true Christians must not despair." The outstretched hand to Christ will never remain empty. The fourth gospel presents Judas holding out her hand. By placing the Eucharistic bread in it, Christ launches the last call to evil, at night, when darkness thickens. Judah's fingers tighten around the slain Lamb. Judas goes out "and it was night." The night receives him and hides the terrible secret of his communion with satan. This is Judah. But Judas carries in his hand, now the hand of satan, a terrible mystery. Hell keeps this piece of bread in her bosom; part of the light, is it not the faithful and exact expression of the word: "The light shines in the darkness"? The gesture of Jesus designates the last mystery of the Church: the hand of Jesus offering the Eucharistic bread, the call that is addressed to all because they are all in the power of the ruler of this world. The light still does not dispel the darkness, but it no longer has power

over the invincible Light. We are all in the ultimate tension of divine love."⁵

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The image that we could detach from the exposition of the Orthodox teaching on subjective salvation is perhaps the one that the Holy Apostle Paul portrays when he speaks of a continuous "stretching forward", of a continuous running and search for God. "I do not say that I have acquired the rightness, or that I am perfect; but I follow her that I will only catch her, for I too have been caught by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I still don't think I've conquered her. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind me, and tending to what is before, I run to the goal, to the reward of God's call from above in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3: 12-13).

Salvation is gained in the present life, the entrance into the "Kingdom" takes place here. God is the one who offers in this sense his grace, to which man responds by faith and good works. The conditions of subjective salvation are thus grace, faith, and good works. Outside of them, or in the absence of one of them, salvation is not possible.

The understanding of the conditions of salvation differs in Orthodoxy from that of Western Christianity. Essential is

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 91-92.

the ontological dimension of salvation, the affirmation of a continuous inner transformation in man. Through grace, faith and good works, man increases in union with God, he deifies himself. In this context, the Christian life is "life in Christ," an increase of man's life in the life of God.

Man's contribution, although God is the one who "saves", is always affirmed. Theology does not remain at the level of concepts, but it is always related to life. A certain vision of salvation also determines a certain way of life, a certain vision of life and time. Man's relationship with God takes on a dynamic aspect. The time here is directed to eternity. "This is how time is constituted, with the past overcome, with the present felt as insufficient, with the future towards which we aspire through hope, from a continuous need and possibility to overcome our limitation, basically seeking eternity, having in us the thirst for it, attracting ourselves to her, but aware that we will have it only from the full gift of God."⁶

Faith is seen as a living dialogue with God by grace, followed by deeds as an expression of love. The personalistic aspect of man's relationship with God stands out. Man's ability to do good is present during salvation. This "is

⁶ Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă...*, vol. 2, p. 246.

acquired neither by deeds in the Protestant sense nor by deeds in the Catholic sense, but in the course of the deeds,"⁷ in a continual union with God.

The denial of good deeds, in Protestant theology, occurs as a result of the idea that man cannot do good, on the one hand, and on the other hand as a result of opposition to the idea that man by good deeds obtains a right before God, idea fully promoted in Roman Catholicism. Good, in the first and last instance, is only God. As man has fallen, this, the good, becomes an impossibility for him. Defining for fallen human nature is sin.

In Orthodoxy, man is seen less as nature, fallen or not, than as a person who can open himself through this character to the love of the communion of Persons. Man is not seen as separate from God, autonomous, being able to obtain automatically, based on his meritorious good deeds, the contractual reward from God. Through grace man can transform, thus identifying with the good, becoming, like the God with whom he is in communion, love. If in relation to a human person man changes by imprinting in his being something of the person to whom he has connected, all the more being in connection with God, the Person par

⁷ Idem, *Condițiile mântuirii...*, p. 256.

excellence, the Trinitarian personal communion, man becomes after the likeness of God, the being his doing good, every movement of his being being an exteriorization of the good, or an increase of it. Through faith and works, in grace, man thus advances to God. Or, in other words, it is deified. Apart from this movement (transfiguration) of his being, by grace, he cannot find his salvation, he remains locked in the selfishness that leads to death, both as a person-spirit and as a nature.

If the fulfillment of existence consists in being in dialogue with divine love, the refusal of this love is not a simple legal guilt that will have to be satisfied in order to repair the offense to a sovereign deity.

Man oscillates, in a personalist Christian vision, between two abysses. "Existence is placed in the tension between the two poles: light-communion and darkness-loneliness."⁸

Sin does not appear to us, in this case, as a mere legal violation of a law instituted by God. "The conception cultivated in Western Christian circles, which identified sin with legal violation, and salvation with individual justification and atonement, linked in human consciousness Christian

⁸ Paul Evdokimov, *Rugul aprins*, trans. Diac. Teodor V. Damșa, Edit. Mitropoliei Banatului, Timișoara, 1994, p. 34.

ethics to a multitude of psychological complexes that are just as deadly."⁹

The conception of sin, seen in this way, leads to numerous implications in Western spirituality and thought, placing man's relationship with God within the framework of an exteriority that goes as far as the total separation of the two elements. Or the frames of sin are not exclusively moral, but belong to the dynamism of human nature, to its ontological transformation.

⁹ Christos Yannaras, *Libertatea moralei*, trad. Mihai Cantuniari, Edit. Anastasia, București, 2004, p. 33.

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