

VICTIM VS SELF-SACRIFICE: RELIGION – POLITICS – CULTURE

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Ethical Reflections on Self-Sacrifice in Russian Monasticism* **

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This paper analyses self-sacrifice as the highest form of love, focusing on the Byzantine perception of ethical principles of self-sacrifice that was transferred into Russian cultural space via translations of neptic literature, thus continuing the ancient philosophical tradition. On the basis of a historical source (Eusebius of Caesarea) the author highlights cases of self-sacrifice in individuals' lives out of charitable love for their neighbours and illuminate a new Christian axiological outlook on sacrifice. Sacrifice and self-sacrifice are not understood in the sense of a victim of the system, but rather as a sacrifice out of love for one's neighbour. Christians approach death positively either through conscious sacrifice/self-sacrifice or through spiritual struggle, asceticism. In relation to this, this paper outlines the topic of self-sacrifice in relation to martyrdom and, subsequently, the martyrdom of conscience, in which the essence of ascetic life originates. The basic aim is to compare the Greek and Russian understanding of self-sacrifice by using specific examples. The foundational sources for this paper are neptic texts, the authors of which, on the basis of their own experience, asked their readers for spiritual struggle and sacrificing their lives to God. Their ideas were transferred to Russian context through the *Dobrotolublye*, which had a profound impact on the spread of the hesychastic tradition in Russia in the nineteenth century. Exemplars of spiritual struggle within representatives of Russian monasticism, who sacrificed their lives to God and brought a Byzantine understanding of spiritual struggle against passion into Russian

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culture include Paisiy Velichkovsky, Nazariy Kondratyev, Serafim of Sarov, and the Optina elders Mosey, Leonid, and Makariy.

Keywords: philosophy, ethics, self-sacrifice, religion, culture, neptic, ascetic

Автор анализирует проблематику самопожертвования как высшей формы любви с акцентом на византийском восприятии этических принципов самопожертвования, пришедшем в пространство русской культуры через переводы ниптической (аскетической) литературы, продолжающей традицию античной философии. С опорой на исторический источник – труд Евсевия Кесарийского – рассмотрены случаи принесения в жертву собственной жизни из милосердной любви к ближнему и новый, аксиологически христианский взгляд на жертвоприношения. Жертвоприношение и самопожертвование понимаются здесь не в качестве «жертвы системы», но скорее как жертва из любви к ближнему. Христианский подход к смерти в некотором роде позитивен: смерть осмысливается либо через осознанное жертвоприношение или самопожертвование, либо через духовную борьбу – аскезу. Проблематика самопожертвования рассматривается в связи с понятиями мученичества и мук совести, в которых коренится самая суть аскетической жизни. Ключевая цель работы – сопоставить на основании конкретных примеров греческое и русское понимание самопожертвования. Главный источник – ниптические тексты, авторы которых, основываясь на собственном опыте, призывают читателей к духовной борьбе и принесению своей жизни в жертву Богу. Их идеи проникли в русскую культуру через сборник «Добротолюбие», оказавший значительное влияние на распространение в России исихастской традиции в конце XVIII – начале XIX в. Примерами духовной борьбы в среде российского монашества, из любви приносившего жизнь в жертву Богу и перенесшего византийское понимание духовной борьбы со страстями и стремления к добродетелям в русскую культурную среду, были Паисий Величковский, Назарий Кондратьев, Серафим Саровский, оптинские старцы Моисей, Лев и Макарий.

Ключевые слова: философия, этика, самопожертвование, религия, культура, ниптический, аскетический

Thinkers in each epoch view the topic of self-sacrifice through different prisms of understanding the world and humanity. It is therefore understandable that self-sacrifice has various philosophical, historical, and cultural interpretations, which often lead to different conclusions. In exploring this topic, the selection of methodology depends on the analysis of the cultural dimensions of sacrifice, which is based on the functional understanding of sacrifice proposed by the French sociologist and philosopher Émile Durkheim, the creator of this approach [Аникин, с. 65]. Traditionally, tackling this topic has taken the form of evaluating the

social context of sacrifice or broader social and cultural examinations of the concepts of self-sacrifice. Many ethical issues have so far been evaluated primarily from the point of view of Western European thinkers, who were significantly influenced by the Protestant understanding of ethics; therefore, a clear delimitation of the methodological foundation is critical for determining the approach to self-sacrifice.

If we posit that the term *sacrifice* – as in, that which is sacrificed (*жертва* (zhertva)) and, more prominently, the term *sacrifice* (oblation) as in the act of sacrifice (*жертвоприношение* (zhertvoprinoshenie)) – are linked to the material world, and *devotion* (in Russian – and other Slavic languages – etymologically related to *self-sacrifice*, *жертвенность* (zhertvennost')) is linked to the spiritual sphere, then it is evident that multiple authors have adopted a postmodern interpretation of the terms *sacrificial* (*жертвенное* (zhertvennoe)) and *sacred* (*сакральное* (sakral'noe)) [Гижа] and attempted to explain the terms *profane* and *sacred* [Попович, с. 64] on the basis of Mircea Eliade, who places them in opposition to each other [Eliade]. The separation of the sacred from the profane in Western thought, however, has led to the expulsion of religious philosophy and ethics from social life, contributing to the later prominence of secularism and atheism. For this reason, Nikos Matsoukas criticizes the subjective position of Herbert Hunger [Hunger, p. 88] and other researchers, who make “an axiomatic distinction between worldly –profane and ecclesiastic–sacred in a historically, but even more so philologically absurd manner” [Ματσούκας, p. 399]. A critical conceptual analysis of the theological approach to the sacred–profane relationship [Гижа] led us to the idea of outlining the influence of Greek neptic thought on self-sacrifice in Russian monasticism and to delve into the understanding the sacrifice of love (i. e. charitable sacrifice; *жертва любви* (zhertva lyubvi)) through devotion (i. e. sacrificing one’s life, as devotion and sacrifice are etymologically connected in multiple Slavic languages) to God via asceticism.

Regarding objectivity, we consider it extremely important to draw attention to the Byzantine perception of ethical principles of self-sacrifice, which entered the Russian cultural space from Byzantium and acted as a continuation of the ancient philosophical tradition. It is not our intent to confront the eastern and western understandings of this topic in context of Russian culture, but rather to note specific examples of self-sacrifice by individuals who thus carried out a sacrifice of (charitable) love (*жертва любви* (zhertva lyubvi)). The presented analysis of self-sacrifice is based on the Greek neptic tradition, which found an application in the Russian cultural context, where Jesus Christ was for a long time viewed as the ideal of selfless (i. e. self-sacrificing, charitable) behaviour, representing self-sacrifice as the highest form of love in the words: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15 : 13) (all English translation of Bible verses taken from NRSV). Jesus suggests himself as an example, sacrificing himself for “the life of the world” (Jn 6 : 51).

Self-sacrifice as the highest form of love (жертва любви (zhertva lyubvi))

The highest form of love is sacrificing (i. e., devoting) one's life to God or one's neighbour (i. e., fellow human beings); the sacrifice of love (*жертва любви* (zhertva lyubvi)) therefore holds an important place in Christian teachings. The usual connotations of sacrifice are connected with self-sacrifice, overcoming the fear of death when acting in another person's interests and for their salvation: this is the highest display of spirituality and determination [Гижа, с. 573]. This means that the perfection of Christian love (charity) is not found in the psychological, but in the ontological dimension, where one no longer discerns oneself from one's neighbour, but loves one's neighbour as oneself because Christ is in them [Mantzaridis, p. 229]. In historical sources, multiple such cases are recorded, testifying that many believers sacrificed their lives for love of their neighbours during the historical persecutions of Christianity and deadly plagues, imitating Christ, who sacrificed Himself for the sake of all humanity. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea mentions the writings of Dionysius of Alexandria as evidence of the immeasurable love Christians feel towards the terminally ill and of their selflessness in the name of Christ:

At any rate, most of our brethren, through their surpassing love and brotherly kindness being unsparing of themselves and clinging to one another, fearlessly visiting the sick and continually ministering to them, serving them in Christ, most cheerfully departed this life with them, becoming infected with the affliction of others, and drawing the sickness from their neighbors upon themselves, and willingly taking over their pains. And many, after they had cared for the sickness of others and restored them to health, themselves died, transferring their death to themselves...¹ [Eusebii Pamphili, p. 688C–689A].

This self-sacrifice of the first Christians, culminating in their deaths, was fueled by immense love for one's neighbour and sprang from a deep faith in God. From this angle, their voluntary deaths out of love for their neighbour "seemed to be little short of martyrdom" [Ibid., p. 689A]. The text further states:

But the action of the pagans was entirely the opposite. They would thrust away those who were just beginning to fall sick, and they fled their dearest; they would cast them upon the roads half-dead, and would treat the unburied bodies as vile refuse, shunning the communication and contagion of the death [Ibid., p. 689B].

This paradox of Christian love is incomprehensible in a non-Christian environment, as is the willingness to sacrifice oneself for one's neighbour. Charitable love assumes acceptance of death and its overcoming with

¹ English translation by Roy J. Deferrari.

faith in Christ, by which life attains a new meaning. One who is free from the fear of death can triumph over the world and taste real life and love [Mantzaridis, p. 235–236]. The epitome of true charitable love is Christ, who, from love for mankind, took “the form of a slave” (Phil. 2 : 7).

The willingness of the first Christians to sacrifice themselves arose from their highest value – love for God and neighbour, founded in the words of Jesus Christ, with which He illuminated the foremost commandment in the Scripture:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matt 22 : 37–40).

The first Christians put this message into practice, as is testified by the apostle Paul in relation to the Galatians, when he states that they were willing to give him even their eyes had it been possible (Gal 4, 15). Immense love for one’s neighbour was professed in the same vein by Abba Agathon at the end of fourth century, when he stated that he would be happy if he could give his own body to a leper [Apoththegmata Patrum, p. 116C].

Self-sacrifice and martyrdom

Christianity, in contrast to pagan religions, offers a new approach to sacrifice with its deep spiritual dimension. It is no longer a sacrifice to pagan idols, but to God and one’s neighbour. People who decided to follow Christ refused oblations to pagan deities and did not hesitate to undergo a martyr’s death in the name of their faith in Christ. In other words, they were willing to give their own lives as the highest sacrifice to Christ. From an axiological standpoint, this stance was crucial, as they willingly accepted death for their highest ideal

A characteristic example of self-sacrifice from a bishop is Ignatius (Theophorus) of Antioch, who chose a martyr’s death even though it could have been avoided. In the period of persecution during the reign of Emperor Trajan, Ignatius was captured and sentenced to death by being thrown to beasts in the Colosseum. While being led to Rome, he found out that local Christians intended to rescue him. He immediately wrote an epistle, in which he asked the Christians of Rome not to attempt to avert his martyrdom, which meant true life for him [Κρικώνης, p. 151].

This makes it evident that, on one hand, he accepted martyrdom in the name of Christ out of love, and, on the other, as a good shepherd he cared about his followers, to whom he wrote seven letters during his last days to encourage them in their spiritual life. In these letters, he shows his fatherly love and expresses the belief that he is not leaving them forever, because he will meet them elsewhere – in the Kingdom of Heaven. In his opinion, people become true friends only in the divine realm; he thus asks Roman Christians to not only praise Christ in words, but to also break away

from worldly matters [Ibid., p. 153]. Such calls to renounce the material world led fourth-century Christians to leave the world behind and lead a monastic life. When a person leaves the mundane world and decides to lead a monastic life, they do so out of an immense love of God, sacrificing everything for Him and embarking on a journey of spiritual struggle.

Authentic Christian life manifests in constant shows of love: Christians therefore approach death in a positive way either through conscious self-sacrifice or through spiritual struggle. This approach is by no means a renunciation of world as a divine creation, but is rather a search for true meaning of human life.

Self-sacrifice and the martyrdom of conscience

During the persecutions in the first three centuries of Christianity, martyrdom in the name of Christ was considered the highest display of love for God. Christians held martyrs in high esteem, seeing them as heroes able to sacrifice themselves for Christ. The situation changed after 313, when the Church was granted freedom and the development of organized monasticism began in Egypt. From this point, Christians had the opportunity to delve more deeply into spiritual issues and focus on the struggle towards self-improvement, which naturally led to an increase in ascetic activity and the formation of monasticism.

Neptic authors, who, on the basis of their personal experiences, encourage people towards spiritual struggle, also deal with the issue of sacrificing one's life in the name of God. Centuries later, their ideas permeated into Russia via the collection *Dobrotolublye*, which had a profound impact on the spread of the hesychastic tradition in Russia at the turn of the nineteenth century, primarily via the influential spiritual centres of Sarov, Valaam, and Optina. The Greek philokalic spirit was thus transposed into Russian culture, where it leaned on the idea of sacrificing-devoting one's life to God that first took form in the early monastic centres in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, and Constantinople in the fourth century. The lives of the first hermits show that the highest ideal of the people who decided to lead a monastic life was the willingness to devote their lives to God through ascetic struggle, the goal of which is to attain the divine image through "violence" against human nature. This "violence" against human nature takes place not through its destruction, but through turning towards God, because asceticism is accompanied by liberation from passion [Παπαδόπουλος, p. 16]. The monks who decided to voluntarily undergo this spiritual struggle were considered heroes of sanctity and exemplars of virtuous life, especially in showing love of God, from which proceeds love of one's neighbour.

Anthony the Great – whose life was described in detail by Athanasius the Great [Athanasii, 1857c] – became an exemplar of asceticism for the hermits. Anthony's spiritual struggle took place in strict asceticism, which first came to be seen as a "martyrdom of consciousness" (μαρτύριον τῆς συνειδήσεως), as Athanasius the Great calls it [Athanasii, 1857b, p. 588A]: it was equated with the martyrdom of blood. Ascetics, so-called white martyrs who "tortured" their

consciousness through spiritual struggle, attained the reward of martyrdom, just like red martyrs, who endured terrible tortures for their faith in Christ.

Athanasius also uses the expression μαρτυρῶν τῇ συνειδήσει when describing the ascetic life of Anthony the Great [Athanasii, 1857c, p. 912B], who sacrificed everything for his love of Christ and opted for the death of the old – sinful-person. This means that self-sacrifice does not have to necessarily end in death, as in the case of Christian martyrs, but can take place in the sphere of spiritual struggle. The topic of self-sacrifice, then, became linked to ascetic struggle, which found many followers in the times to come.

People move forward to charitable love through attaining Christian virtues, the chief among which are humility and obedience. The greater the humility one attains and the more one ignores one's own will, the more one's soul frees itself from passion and grows spiritually. A soul free from passion embraces the entire world, and every person is capable of self-sacrifice. When one is a slave to passion, one cannot love God [Mantzaridis, p. 228]; a Christian way of life therefore requires struggle against passion and attaining virtues. Freeing oneself from passion causes progress in love, which leads one to self-sacrifice. From this standpoint, the sacrificial aspect of Christianity is no longer primary, because sanctity and purity take its place [Попович, с. 66], being attained through perpetual efforts for perfection and being in the divine image.

In addition to the eremitic life as represented by Anthony the Great, cenobitic monasticism also appeared in the fourth century, first given form by Pachomius. In cenobitic monasteries, two-fold communion took place: with God and with one's neighbour. Monks strove for purity of the soul through asceticism out of their love for God. Their communion with their peers sprang from communion with God and primarily from their love of God. In loving God and attaining communion with Him, they saw the divine image in every person and thus loved every person as themselves. In Pachomius' community, each monk's altruism towards all others is evident.

As monks love God and are in communion with Him, they get to know themselves better and perceive the divine image in all people. This incites them to show love to all people, expressing it in prayer. As a part of their personal creed and long nocturnal services, monks' prayers are the highest and most authentic form of love, as they are the result of love for God.

Self-sacrifice in Russian monasticism

In the ninth century, Holy Mount Athos became an eminent centre of spiritual and cultural life, whence asceticism first started permeating into Russia and where the first contact of Russian monks with such an environment took place. The earliest known testimony to the existence of a Russian monastery on Athos dates to 1016 [Actes de Lavra]: it was here that Antony of Kiev probably became a monk [Thomson; Успенский]. He chose an eremitic way of life rather than a cenobitic one upon his return to Russia. The monk Theodosius later became the hegumen of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra with Antony's approval. In this first Russian cenobitic monastery, Theodosius

employed the *typikon* of the Studite monastery in Constantinople [Ταχιάος, p. 452; Ποппэ]. The *Kievan Cave Paterikon* repeatedly highlights that Antony of Kiev brought with him the blessing of the Holy Mountain to Russia [Ольшевская, Травников]. From the above, it can be assumed that respect for Athonite monasticism served as an impulse for many Russian monks to travel to the Holy Mountain, where they learned about the hesychastic tradition. Relations between the Holy Mountain and Russia began to develop and, through translation, the Greek hesychastic tradition started taking root in Russian culture [Tachiaos]. From the eleventh to the thirteenth century, monastic literature in Rus' promoted devotion to asceticism, as expressed in the Sinai Patericon, for example [Krocak, p. 40].

Centuries later, the spiritual crisis that struck Russian society as a result of influence of the Enlightenment [Зеньковский, т. 1, с. 82–110] led to a spiritual rebirth, known as the *philokalic movement*. This began almost concurrently in Greek [Karamanidou, p. 167–169] and Slavic areas in the latter half of the eighteenth century and redirected attention to the Greek hesychastic tradition of the fourteenth century and its most prominent representative, Gregory Palamas (1296–1359). The essential feature of hesychasm was the effort to attain human perfection through cultivating virtues via asceticism and spiritual watchfulness (νήσις). Hesychasts emphasized the importance of purification from vice by employing Byzantine anthropology, the aim of which was the unification of man and God. Nicholas Kabasilas (1322/23–1391) also concentrated on the clarification of anthropological issues, confronting autonomous humanism and anthropocentrism with Christ as the authentic human life [Καβάσιλας, p. 680C]².

Nicholas Kabasilas was experienced in ascetic struggle and clearly delimited anthropological topics. When he writes about life in Christ, he does not moralize, but instead analyzes Christian ontology. In his view, life in Christ is not a mere formal application of the commandments, but rather humanity's ontological renewal by the cultivation of virtues [Ibid., p. 684CD]: people who are spiritually renewed are able to experience the beatitude of the next life in their current lives.

In Greek areas, philokalic renewal was initiated by Macarius Notaras (1731–1805), who published the Greek manuscripts of the neptic authors in the *Philokalia*. In Russia, this spiritual renewal is linked to the activities of Paisiy Velichkovsky (1722–1794), who lived on Mount Athos for eighteen years and surrounded himself with collaborators in order to translate and transcribe neptic ascetic texts.

Paisiy Velichkovsky was acutely aware that the social spiritual crisis was caused by monks distancing themselves from the spirit of the early fathers, and thus decided to provide the Slavs with the great wealth of thought and experience of the neptic ascetic writers. He restored the forgotten Byzantine tradition in Slavic monasticism and transposed the spirit of the *Philokalia* into the Russian context. Paisiy led the translation of

² A detailed analysis of Byzantine anthropology on the basis of Kabasilas' works can be found in P. Nellas (1995).

Greek neptic writings on spiritual issues into Church Slavonic. These were entitled *Dobrotolublye* and precisely encapsulated the sense of the Greek word *philokalia* (φιλοκαλία), which means “sense for beauty” and “love of good”; in other words, that which is emotionally or morally beautiful. *Philokalia* is connected to the love of God, who is the source of goodness.

In the neptic texts, the philosophical and theological understandings of the life of one who is willing to pay a price to achieve a certain goal are closely linked. Self-sacrifice is understood as renunciation of the material world and forms an ideal for the monastic way of life, manifesting itself in everyday behaviour. One’s turning to the spiritual world is preceded by leaving behind the material world and shifting one’s thoughts towards the Creator. Leaving the world here means sacrificing everything for God and, at the same time, devoting one’s entire mind and heart to the spiritual world through spiritual struggle. From this standpoint, spiritual struggle, asceticism, is perceived as a self-sacrifice in the name of Christ, which in Christian consciousness holds connotations of sacrificing oneself out of love for man, in whom the divine image is present.

Another prominent figure of Russian monasticism was Nazariy Kondratyev (1735–1809), the hegumen of the Valaam monastery who participated in transferring the spiritual experience of the neptic fathers into the practice of Russian monks and under whose lead the number of monks at Valaam grew rapidly [Минин]. In a letter, he asked Paisiy Velichkovsky to provide his manuscript translations of the neptic texts, which he published with Paisiy’s consent in 1793 in the *Dobrotolublye* [Ταχιάδος, p. 226]. By making these writings publicly available, the Greek philokalic spirit became part of Russian culture, significantly influencing contemporary ideas and spiritual life [Deseille]. It is thus understandable that “the publishing of the Slavic-Russian *Dobrotolublye* is a milestone not only for the history of Russian monasticism, but also for the general history of Russian culture” [Флоровский, с. 128]. Despite the fact that neptic authors intended their works primarily for monks, their guidance also met with a positive response from the Russian intelligentsia, which was looking for a deeper meaning to life. The neptic authors focus on questions related to ascetic struggle and see the ideal life in unification with God through the cultivation of virtues. This leads to purification from passion and assuming the divine image.

Among the important figures of this period is Serafim of Sarov (1759–1833), who had a profound impact on Russian monasticism. He habitually studied the *Dobrotolublye* and other neptic texts, seeking answers regarding the meaning and purpose of life. Onerous monastic struggles and endeavours to purify his soul of passion allowed the venerable Serafim to reach a high degree of spiritual perfection. When he accepted the role of elder (*starets*), a spiritual father and leader, he began to welcome visitors to his cell out of love for his neighbours. This was a great sacrifice on his part, as he had to devote all his will to serving God and his neighbours. This ascetic, showing perfect self-denial, humility, patience, and unwavering faith, believed in the significance of transforming an old person into a new one, cleansing oneself

of passions, and attaining virtues, all of which result in the human soul being filled with inner peace and knowing the true joy of life. He regarded all people with utmost respect and immeasurable love. He was known for his calm manner of speech, permeated with fatherly tenderness, which was reported to warm even the coldest of hearts, bring tears of remorse and repentance, remedy even the most callous of sinners, and fill listeners with divine peace. The case of Serafim makes it evident that, in monasticism, love of man is preceded by love of God. When a monk reaches a certain degree of perfection, Christ's love starts to affect him, connecting him to the entire world, as is captured in the words of Russian monk St Siluan the Athonite [Σαχαρωφ, p. 399], who, at the turn of the twentieth century, continued the hesychastic tradition at the Holy Mountain.

The most important centre of the hesychastic tradition in Russia was the Optina monastery, which was linked to the activities of many influential figures, including the elders Mosey (1782–1862), Leonid (1768–1841), and Makariy (1788–1860), who were introduced to the hesychastic way of life by the pupils of Paisiy Velichkovsky. All three valued Paisiy's translations greatly, collecting them in the library of the skete, which came to contain the entire body of both these translations and his own works. They achieved a striking degree of humility through strict asceticism; with their immense love, they sacrificed themselves to the service of their neighbours with all their souls.

The second round of Russian neptic translations thus started at Optina under the patronage of the metropolitan of Moscow. It was overseen by Elder Makariy, who devoted significant amounts of both time and effort to the publishing process. Assistance was lent primarily by Ivan Kireyevsky (1806–1856), who became enraptured by the spiritual and intellectual wealth of Greek neptic thought, which he had not known previously. He was convinced that the fathers' ideas, terminology, and logical argumentation could supplement contemporary philosophy in those aspects where it lacked. Even though the philokalic spirit was contrary to Western philosophical movements, it should not be perceived as an ideological attack; Kireyevsky neither denied nor renounced contemporary philosophy, but rather intended to enrich it via new elements taken from the ascetic and hesychastic experience of the neptic authors [Киреевский, 1911, с. 223–264; Киреевский, 1979, с. 314–355]. Kireyevsky was thus one of the first Russians to initiate a “breakthrough in Russian thinking” [Герцен, с. 169–170].

Russian translations of the neptic texts greatly influenced the following development of monasticism in the country, and also contributed to shaping Russian terminology, literature, and culture in general. Under Makariy's guidance, his colleagues continuously processed manuscripts and tried to accurately capture the ideational and expressive nuance of the neptic writings, or explain it when they were unable to attain an exact reproduction. These translation efforts led to the development of Russian terminology, which had to correspond to the original meanings and sense of ascetic struggle and the degrees of spiritual self-improvement. This was an extremely valuable experience for the elder's disciples, as they studied the

ideas of the neptic authors and endeavoured to comprehend the meanings behind their advice, which they then applied to everyday life. For Makariy, it was a period of time-consuming efforts – he was directly involved in the publishing process and had to check in minute detail each translation before submitting it for censorship, all in addition to receiving the monks and pilgrims he was guiding spiritually. He was well-aware that it was essential to appropriately translate each word rooted in human spiritual life. The life and deeds of Father Makariy serve as a clear example not only of sacrifice to Christ through spiritual struggle, but also of sacrificing all of one's willpower, here to publishing the works of neptic authors.

The greatest achievement of the Optina monastery was issuing a multitude of texts that introduced the immeasurable wealth of neptic thought to the general public. At the same time, the collaboration between Optina and its elders and the Russian intelligentsia started to take shape. This is testified to by the fact that elders received visits from many prominent figures, including Nikolay Vasilyevich Gogol, Konstantin Nikolayevich Leontiev, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, and Vladimir Sergeyeovich Solovyov, among others. These great minds, disgusted by the spiritual crisis, came to Optina to find spiritual values in discussions with the wise elders.

Self-sacrifice as an antipode to suicide

Humanity, in contrast to unreasoning animals, which follow their instincts and needs, has the ability to control these impulses. The mind and free will allow mankind to transcend biological urges and to act as independent and free beings. For this reason, Athanasius the Great (295–373) states that only man can determine his life freely and choose to end it voluntarily [Athanasii, 1857a, p. 64B].

An act of self-sacrifice that ends one's life does not differ much from suicide at a first glance. Both are essentially a conscious ending of one's life; however, the difference between the two could not be greater. The criteria for distinguishing these two lies in the stimuli for ending one's life. If these are altruistic, self-sacrifice takes place; if they are egoistical, it is a suicide. In the former case, the life of a person who acts out of immense love is fulfilled; in the latter, a life of a person who acts in order to avoid failure or despair is unfulfilled. In self-sacrifice, one overcomes death through love; in suicide, one is defeated by death, not being able to love [Mantzariadis, p. 443].

Self-sacrifice is an expression of love and selflessness, which is cultivated by overcoming the fear of death. Suicide is a testament to egoism and materialism [ibid., p. 446]. When one alienates oneself from God and one's neighbours, one alienates oneself from life and its meaning, shutting oneself in own's ego, which leads to committing suicide. Such an act is self-centred, differing in this manner from suicide caused by mental illness. In the patristic literature, suicide is considered a sin worse than murder: the Orthodox Church therefore refuses burials of those who commit suicide, with the exception of the mentally ill [Βουλγαράκης].

Society as such generally condemns suicide – as Aristotle states:

But dying in order to flee poverty, erotic love, or something painful is not the mark of a courageous man but rather of a coward. For it is softness to flee suffering, and such a person endures death not because it is noble to do so but in order to avoid a bad thing³ [Aristotelis, III, 1116a, 12–15]⁴.

* * *

The topic of sacrifice and self-sacrifice has to be approached within a wider context in order to balance the Byzantine and Western influences on our understanding of the Russian context. Self-sacrifice is a conscious choice, made out of love, and is closely linked to freedom – people can decide whether to love their neighbours and sacrifice themselves for them or hate them and act indifferently towards them. Abba Dorotheus, one of the neptic authors, aptly describes the love of God and neighbour using the imager of a circle:

Imagine that the world is a circle, that God is the center, and that the radii are the different ways human beings live. When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the center of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God. Imagine an opposite situation: the further away human beings move from God, the further away they move from each other. And the further away they move from each other, the further away they move from God [Dorothei, p. 1696BD].

Progressing in love of God is progressing in freedom, which, in turn, is progressing in selflessness. In this context, love is an ontological element of the human condition [Mantzaridis, p. 233], which is why the apostle Paul states that man can do altruistic deeds and give away all his possessions to the poor, even hand over his body and sacrifice himself for others, but if he has no love, he gains nothing (1Kor. 13, 1–3). A great deal of attention is paid to this aspect in neptic texts; individual authors agree that self-sacrifice without love can be founded in a selfish frame of mind and lead to vainglory, which is a great obstacle on the road to perfection. Philanthropic activities in particular frequently hide the vainglorious intents of people who are more interested in their public image than in actually helping the suffering. Such philanthropy does not hold a positive value in Christian ethics [Mantzaridis, p. 235]; even if one sacrifices oneself, if it is done in such manner, it will bring no satisfaction.

³ English translation by Robert C. Bartlett, and Susan D. Collins.

⁴ “Τὸ δ’ ἀποθνήσκειν φεύγοντα πενίαν ἢ ἔρωτα ἢ τι λυπηρὸν οὐκ ἀνδρείου, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον δειλοῦ· μαλακία γὰρ τὸ φεύγειν τὰ ἐπίπονα, καὶ οὐχ ὅτι καλὸν ὑπομένει, ἀλλὰ φεύγων κακόν.”

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