

THE SACRED MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH – THE THEOLOGY OF DIVINE NAME

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Ilarion Alfeyev, *Taina Sfântă a Bisericii. Introducere în istoria și problematica disputelor imiaslave*
[The Sacred Mystery of the Church: Introduction to the History and the Problematic of the Debates on the Veneration of the Name of God],
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We would like to highlight the publication at Renașterea Publishing House of Hilarion Alfeyev's *Taina Sfântă a Bisericii. Introducere în istoria și problematica disputelor imiaslave* [The Sacred Mystery of the Church: Introduction to the History and the Problematic of the Debates on the Veneration of the Name of God], edited by Rev. Prof. Ioan Chirilă. The paper is an emblematic reference point amid the newest publications in the field. It is of utmost interest for both dogmatic theology and Orthodox spirituality, as it tackles highly important core subjects and theoretical and practical challenges and dangers. First of all, the prayer of the mind in the heart, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner", is a forever living treasure of the Church, extremely topical for all those who aim for a spiritual life which goes beyond monotony, mediocrity and stereotypes. In this respect, the long excerpts from the writings of the Hesychast Fathers, which are included in this book, cannot be understood if we do not try, at least to a certain point, to practice the Jesus Prayer ourselves. The paper is also interesting for dogmatic theology, as the dogmatic issues it discusses, regarding the nature of the name of God in general and the name of Jesus in particular, are extremely complicated from a dogmatic point of view. Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev aptly puts together a file containing possible solutions, without however positioning himself for or against any of the sides, given that the theological issues raised have not yet been satisfactorily solved by the Russian Church; de jure, the synod's 1913 decision to condemn the adepts of imiaslavie (namely, those who support the veneration of the name of Jesus) is still valid.

The dispute started from Saint John of Kronstadt's assertion that the Name of God is God Himself. Indeed, at first sight, it seems outrageous, but, to understand the premises and significant aspects related to this issue, we would need to delve into the history of philosophy, into the so-called "problem of universals". One of the biggest philosophical issues was that of trying to clarify the nature of intangible, concepts. Are they real, meaning that they objectively reflect the intelligible "skeleton" of the world or, on the contrary, are they simple conventions, constructs or projections of human reason? The big issue of the imiaslavie dispute was that it did not entail only the relation between a created being and their intelligible name but mainly referred to the relation between God and His name. Here, a double relation needs to be clarified: 1) between the rational, speaking man and the Name of God and 2) between the Name of God and God Himself, in His reality. In other words, this relationship contains three terms: a) the concrete word we use when we say God, meaning its phonetic and grammatical form; b) the form or intelligible essence of the word; c) the supra-intelligible meaning aimed at, namely, the very reality of God, Who is beyond reason. (Incidentally, the connection between the intelligible and the supra-intelligible is nowadays a great challenge for contemporary theology, with exceptional cultural stakes.)

I believe the solution to this problem was partially given by some of the Orthodox intellectuals who intervened in the final part of the dispute, namely:

1) Vladimir Ern, a Professor of universal history at the University of Moscow, noticed the crucial importance of the subject, which focuses on "all the rays of the shining Truth, dispersed into various concerns and yearnings of the contemporary spirit" (p. 701). It "answers with infinite depth to the entire series of negations of European history, thus proving to be a great, worthy moment in the dialectic of life worldwide". [our translation] Ern pleaded for those who believed there was an objective connection between the Name of God and God Himself. According to Vladimir Ern, there is an ontological relationship, an objective presentation of the grace of God in His Name, irrespective of the intentionality of human consciousness – that is, irrespective of what man aims for when they utter the name and of the attention level reached by the one praying. Ern puts forward several arguments:

First, if the Name of God were a simple convention, if there were no real, objective connection between God and His Name, how could the sin of blasphemy and of taking the Name of God in vain exist?

Another argument is the analogy between the presence of God in His Name and the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Just as, in the Eucharist, after the consecration of the gifts, we have an objective presence of Christ, meaning that we have the Flesh and Blood of God, irrespective of how worthy or not we are about this reality, so is God present in His Name.

The third argument is borrowed from the iconodules: just as there is an actual relationship between an icon and its prototype, between an icon and Christ or the saints it portrays – irrespective of how we position ourselves in front of the icon and of the quality of our prayer, so in the Name of God a carrier of increate divine energy, no matter how worthy the man who utters it is. Ern blames the opposite side, belonging to nominalism, psychologism and subjectivism. He explains the fact that few people have the mystical experience of the power of the Name of God through the real fracture which exists between man and God, because of sin. However, this separation is not between God and His Name, but between man and the Name of God, between man's consciousness and the Name of God. Here is the essence of the separation which prevents us from getting into real contact with God by uttering His Name in prayer.

2) Another solution is that proposed by Losev, a scholar with a complex educational background, covering almost all the significant cultural fields of his time. He goes along the line of Pavel Florensky, according to whom we can say that the Name of God is God, if we understand this to be as rendering present or if we bear in mind the platonic model of the participation of the uttered name to the hypostatic reality it denominates, in other words, the relation between phoneme, morpheme and sememe (p. 738). However, we cannot say that God is His Name. Therefore, the Name of God is God, but God is not His Name. It is so, because, in full Palamite tradition, the Being of God is not fully covered by His Name, as God cannot be fully encompassed by any concept; it remains forever in an irreducible affirmative indeterminacy, which we can call both Mytery and infinite Light. Consequently, Losev puts forward an antinomic solution, avoiding religious rationalism and absolute apophatism; the latter entails agnosticism and atheism, by projecting upon God the Kantian "thing-in-itself", meaning a reality altogether inaccessible and unknown in the very phenomenality of its manifestation. To absolute apophatism, nothing of what God reveals or says has any substance or value.

Losev believes that the Name of God is God's highest energy, inseparable from the essence of God; it is God's Light, Power and Perfection. Otherwise, even the most

fervent and consummate prayer would not lead to communion with God, but an encounter with something created (pp. 748-749; 752).

3) Finally, Bulgakov makes a surprising assertion, which will also be my conclusion, that is, the Name of Jesus comprises all the names of the divine being (Jesus being the hypostatic name of the Person of Jesus, not only the name of a feature or a divine attribute); the Name of Jesus comprises all human names, as He fully hypostatized the entire human nature. The Name of Jesus is the absolute Name.

In conclusion, the name of Jesus is uncreated divine energy, containing also an intelligible human articulation. It is an uncreate, divine-human name, supra-conceptual in its divine nature, but with a relative diversity of morphological and phonetic material forms (varying around an intelligible, semantically univocal nucleus) in the various languages in which we use the name Jesus to address the incarnate Logos.