

# Apophaticism and Cataphaticism in Protestantism

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Aufsatz legt die grundlegende Überlegenheit des aphophatischen Ansatzes [negative Gottesaussagen] über den kataphatischen [positive Gottesaussagen] dar, wenn es um Gotteserkenntnis in der christlichen Theologie geht. Der Protestantismus, der häufig (und oft verdienstermaßen) des unmäßigen Rationalismus beschuldigt wurde, steht diesem Problem eigentlich gleichgültig gegenüber. Die vorliegende kurze Studie beabsichtigt aufzuzeigen, dass Protestanten mehr Anlass haben (im Vergleich zur

römisch-katholischen und orthodoxen Kirche), apophatische Theologie in ihr übliches epistemologisches Konzept zu integrieren. Die meisten Nachfahren der Reformation haben es sich in Glaubensdingen bewusst versagt, ihr Vertrauen auf materielle Grundlagen zu setzen, und beten daher den unsichtbaren Gott an, der nicht abgebildet werden kann. Darüberhinaus legt der Autor einen besonderen Schwerpunkt auf einen apophatischen Umgang mit dem Herrenmahl und schlägt vor, dass russische Baptisten diesen Ritus neu überdenken und es offen als ein Sakrament begehen.

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RÉSUMÉ

L’auteur de cet article considère que la voie apopatique de la connaissance de Dieu est fondamentalement supérieure à la voie cataphatique en théologie chrétienne. Le protestantisme, qui est fréquemment (et souvent injustement) accusé de rationalisme excessif, est en fait resté indifférent à cette question. Le présent et bref travail de recherche veut montrer que les protestants ont davantage de raisons (que le catholicisme romain et l’orthodo-

xie orientale) d’inclure l’apophatisme dans leur approche épistémologique courante. Ayant intentionnellement rejeté l’appui sur des objets matériels pour servir de point de départ à la foi, la plupart de ceux qui se situent dans la ligne de la réforme adorent le Dieu invisible, qu’on ne peut pas représenter par un portrait. L’auteur met en outre un accent particulier sur l’approche apopatique de la cène et suggère que les baptistes russes reconsidèrent ce rite en lui accordant le label de sacrement.

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SUMMARY

This paper shows the essential superiority of the apophatic way of knowing God over the cataphatic way in Christian theology. Protestantism, which is frequently (and often deservedly) accused of excessive rationalism, has actually remained indifferent to this problem. The present brief research intends to show that Protestants have even more grounds than Roman Catholics

and Orthodox believers to include apophaticism in their epistemology. Having deprived themselves intentionally of reliance on a material beginning in issues of faith, most followers of the Reformation worship the God Invisible, who cannot be portrayed. Additionally, the paper puts special emphasis on the apophatic approach to the Lord’s Supper, suggesting that (Russian) Baptists should reconsider this rite and openly style it as a sacrament.

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1. Introduction

In his marvellous treatise *Mystic Theology*, which probably stems from the early Middle Ages,

the Christian author (Pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite introduced the notion of the two ways of the Christian knowledge of God.<sup>1</sup> The first way



is cataphatic (καταφατικός) and consists of traditional positive statements, for example ‘God is light’ (1 Jn 1:5). This is a theological approach which describes God through affirmative assertions – who or what he is. The second way is apophatic (ἀποφατικός) and rejects any attempt at rational definition of the Deity. It is based on complete negation, for example, continuing the thought in 1 John 1:5, ‘There is no darkness in him’. This is the approach which describes God through negative statements – who or what he is not. This is the so-called ‘more excellent way’ (cf. 1 Cor 12:31) which fearlessly proclaims the benefit of the humble Christian lack of knowledge over any intellectual effort. Whatever a human would think about God, it is disproportionate to his essence and greatness (Isa 55:8-9).

Cataphatic knowledge is the more accessible and customary of the two. At the same time, it has obvious, previously determined borders that cannot be transcended. Apophaticism, on the other hand, is capable of breaking through the vicious circle and of accomplishing a spiritual ascension to the Lord. However, knowledge in the usual sense of the word disappears; language becomes silent, proving itself powerless to express the inexpressible, and primacy is given to prayerful, mystical fellowship with the invisible, incomprehensible God who cannot be depicted and, at the same time, loves us without limit and is close to us. The feasible combination of both methods of knowing God is, apparently, the very blessing that a Christian ought to strive for, until God himself answers all questions in eternity.

## 2. Biblical apophaticism

When we immerse ourselves in the divine wisdom of Scripture, we meet apophatic statements on almost every page. The foundation of God’s law, the Ten Commandments, is almost completely apophatic. The Decalogue, which uniquely gives people freedom in the Lord, teaches the (few) things that a person should *not* do, rather than (many) things to do: You shall not make for yourself an idol; you shall not take the name of the Lord in vain; you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour; you shall not covet your neighbour’s house... What is the sense of all this? The cataphatic way of thinking is so limited and superficial that it can normally be considered only as an addition (or some small

part) in relation to apophaticism, which has an inexpressibly wider and deeper world view.

In Isaiah 64:4 and 1 Corinthians 2:9 we find a surprising promise: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.’ At first glance the apophatic approach to the theme of eternity suggested here (by means of several negations) carries little information and seems to lose out to the cataphatic approach, for instance, if we compare it with the detailed description of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21. However, this impression immediately disappears as soon as we somehow manage to master the apophatic method, and then even the brief ‘negative’ description of heaven in the Bible is wonderfully transformed.

‘Things that the eye has not seen...’ apophatically exclaim the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Paul. Let us simplify the idea, reducing it to the cataphatic level: what things have our eyes seen on earth? Certainly, in the fallen world we meet much evil and sin. At the same time, we have the opportunity to enjoy the masterpieces of great artists, sculptors and architects; we can see the magnificence of divine creation all around. Yet, according to Isaiah and Paul, that is *nothing*<sup>2</sup> when compared to the things God has prepared for his children from all eternity.

‘Things that the ear has not heard...’ Living on earth we hear declarations of love from people who are dear to our hearts, the penetrating word of Christian preaching, and moving singing – yet even these things are *nothing*, bearing heaven in mind!

‘Things that have not entered the heart of man...’ Although many wonderful, spirit-ennobling ideas and creative revelations already occur to us, all these things are absolutely *nothing* in comparison with what will come true in eternity!

Thus, starting from cataphaticism, which is usual for most people, we gradually move to the apophatic way, which was already meditated on by some of the church fathers, a way which fearlessly proclaims the superiority of a person’s ignorance.<sup>3</sup> As it is written:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body *I do not know*, or out of the body *I do not know*, God knows – such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man – whether in the body or apart from the body *I do not know*, God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard *inex-*



*pressible* words, which a man *is not permitted* to speak (2 Cor 12:2-4).

The most educated of people, who only a short while before belonged to the elite of Jewish society, the apostle Paul, humbly recognises the inability of his mind and language to describe divine mysteries. What then can be said about other people? 'We know in part and we prophesy in part; for now we see in a mirror dimly...' (1 Cor 13:9, 12). This is the destiny of every person living on earth. As a poet said: 'I pity people who do not know God; I pity people who know all about Him.'<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Protestant apophaticism

Mystical theology, based on the apophatic method, in due time received sufficient recognition in the Christian world in both the West and East,<sup>5</sup> although the Orthodox Church has so far probably expressed greater respect for apophaticism. Protestantism, which is frequently (and often deservedly) accused of excessive rationalism, has actually remained indifferent to this issue. The present brief research intends to show, strange as it may seem, that Protestants have even more grounds (in comparison with Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers) to include apophaticism in their common epistemological concept.

First of all, we see Protestant apophaticism in the refusal to worship any kind of sacred images and objects such as icons, statues, holy relics and holy water. Having intentionally deprived themselves of reliance on a material beginning, most followers of the Reformation worship the God Invisible, who cannot be portrayed. Having put their trust in statements of Scripture,<sup>6</sup> and having declined ambiguous, frequently inconsistent church traditions on the given theme, Protestants, unexpectedly for themselves, have a number of doubtless theological advantages over historical churches. For even the most perfect of icons is inherently similar to anthropomorphic statements about God in the Bible, which, undoubtedly, condescend to the cataphatic thinking of feeble humanity, as though God actually had ears,<sup>7</sup> eyes,<sup>8</sup> lips,<sup>9</sup> hands,<sup>10</sup> feet,<sup>11</sup> wings,<sup>12</sup> feathers,<sup>13</sup> etc. Such imaginative illustrations are probably in a certain way necessary for infants in faith and knowledge, including Protestants. But just as it would be unthinkable to set oneself the task of portraying, for example, a living human soul,<sup>14</sup> so it is likewise unreal to paint a picture of the soul's Origin, the invisible

God. In fact, few people doubt that humankind is created in the image of God and according to his likeness, not in terms of the body but of the soul (reason, feelings, will). And apophaticism – as a more perfect way – points directly to the invisible God, both in the Old (Ex 33:20) and the New Testament: '... who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honour and eternal dominion! Amen' (1 Tim 6:16).

Thus, mature Protestantism, following Scripture, involuntarily moves to the way of apophaticism which is only accessible to those who have left infancy behind. And then much more is revealed to a Christian than he knew before. In this context, Protestant indifference to pilgrimage to the Holy Land (during the Reformation and later) becomes more understandable, because for a Christian the true Jerusalem is a heavenly Jerusalem and not an earthly one.<sup>15</sup> On occasions when an Orthodox or Roman Catholic believer must cross himself, it is sufficient for Protestants to pray mentally; and usually they do it with their eyes closed, not resorting to the mediation of any material image. The Protestant worship service is inherently apophatic, as are their church architecture, the internal decoration of their prayer houses, their 'Puritan' lifestyle, etc. The Russian poet F. I. Tiutchev, who was sensitive to issues of faith, perfectly expressed this peculiarity of Protestantism in 1834:

I love the Lutherans' divine service,  
Their ritual strict, significant, and simple –  
These bare walls and empty Temple  
I understand the high teaching of.<sup>16</sup>

At Sunday school Protestants do not forbid children to use drawings (= use the cataphatic method); they do not, however, accept any worship of such images. Here we can remember a curious paradox which can be observed many times in the history of Christianity: churches in which icons were painted quite often persecuted secular painting (mainly in the Middle Ages) but Protestants were usually not so strict in this regard.<sup>17</sup> Thus followers of the Reformation, as a rule, distinguished fundamentally between religious and secular art, showing severity in the former case and condescension in the latter. The heavenly Original is too great and inexpressible to dare to show him by any selection of paints, while the inaccuracy of artists in depicting the fallen material world is quite pardonable. That which is useful and permissible



for children quite often is not so for adults; that is why most Protestants recommend leaving behind imperfect images and, with fear and trembling, moving to a more excellent way, directly addressing the invisible God.

#### 4. Eucharistic apophaticism

But Christ came to earth in the flesh, people will tell us. In the New Testament we read: 'No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known' (Jn 1:18); '[Christ] ... is the image of God invisible' (2 Cor 4:4). Does this mean, then, that it is possible to portray the invisible Lord? Hardly. Christ did, indeed, come to people in flesh as a true human being, but that does not diminish apophaticism in knowing the Lord, for who is capable of depicting Christ as the Son of God and God the Son? Here the brush in the hands of the icon painter fails.<sup>18</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine a situation in which the Lord Jesus would choose an apostle not only from the Jews, who were not trained to draw and sculpt, but a Greek, competent in the fine arts, who would then take care to preserve the Lord's image and statue for future generations – a way which was common in the ancient world. But this was not pleasing to the Saviour at all. He went in the completely opposite direction, which all of his future disciples must respect:

While they were eating, he took [some] bread, and after a blessing he broke [it], and gave [it] to them, and said, 'Take [it], this is my body.' And when he had taken a cup [and] given thanks ... said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mk 14:22-24).

Thus, it was not an icon of himself that Christ left behind, but the Lord's Supper.<sup>19</sup> The Eucharistic bread and cup, which are outwardly unlike a human being, apophatically reveal the Lord completely to Christians: 'Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?' (1 Cor 10:16). Hence, Christ left the bread and cup to us for Holy Communion, and the New Testament everywhere mentions them along with the words which rationalistic understanding cannot comprehend, that they are, in essence, the body and blood of Christ.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the statement about the invis-

ible presence of the body and blood of the Saviour at the Lord's Supper in the biblical text invariably switches over to a repeated mention of the bread and cup, meaning completely interchangeable, synonymous concepts. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 this pattern could be expressed by the following scheme:

cup – blood  
bread – body – bread – body – bread

In the Eucharistic text which is most frequently quoted, 1 Corinthians 11:23-29, the given scheme is more complex:

bread – body – bread – bread – body – bread – body  
cup – blood – cup – cup – blood – cup

Here we can remember John 6:48-58 in which Jesus calls himself the bread of life:

bread – bread – bread – bread – bread – flesh – flesh – flesh – flesh – flesh – bread – bread

Bearing in mind the known differences between the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant approaches to the interpretation of the Lord's Supper, can the apophatic approach to the problem help us in any way? Certainly! Already in the Athanasian Creed there appears a statement about the unconfoundability and indivisibility of the Holy Trinity.<sup>21</sup> The fathers of the Fourth (Chalcedon, 451) and Sixth (Constantinople, 680-681) Ecumenical Councils arrived at the same idea, only in connection with a Christological problem – in what way the two natures and two wills of the Lord Jesus Christ relate to each other.<sup>22</sup> The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, in his most important work *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), came very close to the same idea concerning Holy Communion:

I ... after floating in a sea of doubt, at last found rest for my conscience in the view ... that it is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and blood are present ... No one may fear to become guilty of heresy if he should believe in the presence of real bread and real wine on the altar, and that every one may feel at liberty to ponder, hold and believe either one view or the other, without endangering his salvation ... I firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ ... In order that the real body and the real blood of Christ may be present in the sacrament, it is not necessary that the bread and wine be transubstantiated ...<sup>23</sup>



There are various interpretations of these amazing words. Often Luther is even accused of not making a complete break with Catholic tradition<sup>24</sup> but the fact remains that he rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation. But how is it possible to reconcile these apparently mutually exclusive statements: 1) In the sacrament of communion, together with the bread and the cup of wine, the true body and blood of Christ are present; and 2) Transubstantiation does not happen? Lutheran theologians explain it in the following, seemingly not too successful, manner:

We accept the true Body and true Blood of our Lord 'in, with and under the blessed bread and wine' (i.e. in bread and wine, with bread and wine, and under the appearance of bread and wine ...).<sup>25</sup>

It is not completely clear how Luther understood this delicate question, but his respectful attitude to the literal sense of the Bible text (as opposed to Calvin and Zwingli, who directed their thoughts to an allegorical or 'spiritual' interpretation of the Eucharistic verses of the New Testament)<sup>26</sup> seems to us worthy of the highest estimation. Yes, it may appear 'unreasonable', 'irrational', bordering on mysticism, and yet Holy Scripture, the immutable word of God, affirms exactly the same things.

In a similar way we 'unreasonably' believe in the Triune God (in his unconfoundability and indivisibility) or in the harmonious combination of the divine and human natures in our Saviour (also necessarily unconfounded and inseparable). It may seem that from the point of view of common sense nothing can be more absurd than these apophatic affirmations. Nevertheless, this belief is professed with rare unanimity by the entire Christian world, including all basic Protestant churches, and no one feels deranged or lacking in understanding. Why is it then that such a remarkable theological method, tested over time, has not been applied to our consideration of the Lord's Supper? It is a well known fact that Scripture asserts that the Eucharistic bread is actual bread and the body of Christ at the same time,<sup>27</sup> and that the cup is actual wine and the blood of Christ at the same time.<sup>28</sup> Maybe we are afraid to deviate from the Protestant foundation of faith? But who was a greater Protestant than Martin Luther? Yet he, standing on the firm foundation of Scripture, was not afraid to recognise its literal sense!

In the upper room where Christ shared the Last Supper with his disciples, there were, at the same

time, ordinary bread, a cup of wine and Christ (his flesh and blood, and the wholeness of his Person). The same mysterious event occurs, as a matter of fact, at the very moment of Communion (breaking bread), without any transubstantiation.<sup>29</sup> This means that – even after the common prayer of an elder and a congregation – the Eucharistic bread remains, undoubtedly, ordinary bread and yet simultaneously becomes the genuine body of Christ. And these two natures remain unconfounded and inseparable from each other, just like the two natures of Christ: one hundred percent bread and one hundred percent his body. The same thing happens to the cup during Communion: the wine remains wine and, at the same time, becomes the genuine blood of our Saviour, unconfounded and inseparable, one hundred percent wine and one hundred percent blood, as we apophatically confess the humanly incomprehensible harmony of the two natures and wills of Jesus Christ, the true God and the true Man.

A similar view of the Lord's Supper was held by the Eastern Church in ancient times. Professor N. D. Uspensky gives a number of curious citations on the given theme from the works of the fathers of the church.<sup>30</sup> However, beginning with the Middle Ages, cataphatic teaching about transubstantiation almost completely superseded the old (apophatic) understanding of Communion.<sup>31</sup> In this sense the condemnation of the Orthodox theologian, professor A. I. Osipov, is remarkable in that he dared recently to give a reminder concerning the 'Chalcedonian' approach to the Eucharist.<sup>32</sup>

But even if we take the most extreme statement of the problem, including transubstantiation, we ought not to fear it, in my opinion. Some argue that Protestants are even frightened by the word 'transubstantiation', which is traditional for Roman Catholic and Orthodox believers in explaining the Lord's Supper. But the interchangeability of Eucharistic concepts shown above, bread-body (body-bread) and cup-blood (blood-cup), lays a New Testament foundation for us to deal with the topic. If, after the prayer over the bread and wine, they are really transformed (only, exclusively) into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, then immediately during participation in the Lord's Supper by members of the church, at the moment of tasting, if we can put it this way, the opposite transubstantiation occurs – into bread and wine<sup>33</sup> (which is why they taste accordingly).<sup>34</sup> Having admitted this point of view,



we avoid the well-known restraint of Protestant 'spiritual' interpretations regarding the ontology of the Lord's Supper, thereby preserving a Protestant position in its essence: bread remains bread, and wine remains wine.<sup>35</sup>

## 5. Russian Baptist apophaticism in practice

The church is the Body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:24), in which Christ himself is the Head (Col 1:18; Eph 5:23) and we are members (parts) of this living united body (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-27). Christ, stopping Saul on his way to Damascus, says: 'Why are you persecuting me? ... I am Jesus whom you are persecuting...' (Acts 9:4-5). By these words the Saviour, abiding in heaven, unmistakably identifies himself with the Church (his body) suffering on earth. 'And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it' (1 Cor 12:26). We see the same thing in Communion: all members (parts) of the Church, belonging to the living Body of Christ in order not to perish, must necessarily feed on his life-giving essence, on flesh and blood, even if they do not quite understand how this sacrament works. It may even be true that the less they understand, the better; then they will trust the incomprehensible God even more. The profound theologian Ephraim the Syrian (fourth century) once said in humility:

And I, brothers, do not become bold because I can meditate upon the mysteries of the Lord, or even touch these arcane and dreadful mysteries. And if I wanted to be daring and began to muse on them, then I would not be capable of comprehending them... I am mortal, from the dust and of dust, made by grace of earthly essence; voluntarily I understand the nothingness of my being and I do not want to enter into the investigation of my Creator, because the Incomprehensible One is dreadful in His essence.<sup>36</sup>

It is surprising but true: the thinking of most Russian Baptists is apophatic, even if they are not familiar with the term. This is fully manifested in their confession of God as great, unfathomable, and as the one who cannot be portrayed.<sup>37</sup> It is difficult to find as much reverence in any other church at Communion, which is not officially called a sacrament at all among Russian Baptists,

although it is such in its essence.

To substantiate this statement, suffice it to remember the all-congregation Friday fast (with full abstention from food and often from water) before Communion; the personal fast on the morning of the day of the Lord's Supper; the penitential prayers; the minor key congregational singing about the suffering Christ, frequently accompanied by tears; the crumb of Eucharistic bread, accidentally dropped on the floor and immediately picked up in reverence; the elders and deacons' fear of spilling the precious cup;<sup>38</sup> and finally the most serious attitude of ordinary members of the church towards the apostolic warning (understood, by the way, literally and not allegorically!): 'For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment on himself. ... For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 11:29-30).<sup>39</sup> These eloquent details precisely testify to the sacramental nature of the domestic Baptist Communion service, which is not a traditional 'remembrance' of Jesus' sufferings,<sup>40</sup> as is often stated officially. No, Russian Baptists not merely see bread on a tray and wine in a cup!

Undoubtedly, there are rationalists among them, lovers of Western theological books and textbooks on theology. Still, the majority of church members (including a considerable number of presbyters, even contrary to the teaching they received at Bible schools and seminaries),<sup>41</sup> under the influence of the general Eastern Orthodox tradition successfully intertwined with fundamental Protestant apophatism, tend to Christian mystical theology, refusing the attempt to comprehend God with their mind. It is for this reason that Russian Baptists so frequently and with especial feeling repeat the following apophatic texts, intuitively chosen from the Scripture:

Behold, God is exalted, and we *do not know* him; the number of his years is *unsearchable* (Job 36:26).

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, *I cannot attain it!* (Ps 139: 6)

Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and his greatness is *unsearchable* (Ps 145:3).

The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding *no one can fathom* (Isa 40:28).

'For *my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are*



*your ways my ways*’, declares the Lord (Isa 55:8). Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable* are his judgments and *unfathomable* his ways! (Rom 11:33).

Because *the foolishness* of God is wiser than men, and *the weakness* of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were *not many* wise according to the flesh, *not many* mighty, *not many* noble; but God has chosen the *foolish things* of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the *weak things* of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the *base things* of the world and the *despised* God has chosen, *the things that are not*, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that *no man may boast* before God (1 Cor 1:25-29).

Thanks be to God for his *indescribable* gift! (2 Cor 9:5).

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the *unfathomable* riches of Christ (Eph 3:8).

Now to the King eternal, *immortal, invisible*, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Tim 1:17).

## 6. Conclusion

At some moment in their history, Russian Evangelical Christians unofficially joined the early Christian apophatic tradition, known to them from the Eastern Orthodox sources. Their way of combining the Eastern mystical thinking with some Protestant beliefs is unique. Many traditional sermons, devotions, hymns and prayers at the meetings of the Slavic Evangelical communities reflect their historical and cultural peculiarities. The apophatic thinking of Russian Evangelicals manifests itself in particular through their voluntary renunciation of worldly values (which was especially noticeable in Soviet times), anti-intellectualism and ‘foolishness’ for Christ’s sake. ‘I speak with Him often, but I cannot reproduce His marvellous conversation’, Russian Baptists sing in one of their popular hymns. Realising that some points expressed in the present article can be debated, I nevertheless find it necessary to draw the attention of as many theologians and ministers of local congregations as possible to this topic for deeper meditation on these features of the Slavic Baptist evangelical spiritual tradition.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See also other treatises of Dionysius the Areopagite, especially ‘Bozhestvennye imena’ [Divine names] in *Misticheskoe bogoslovie* [Mystical theology] (Kiev: Put’ k istine, 1991).
- 2 Elsewhere in the Pauline epistles we also find a complete negation (οὐδεὶς) of whatever is good or loving in humans: ‘If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am *nothing*. And if I give all my possessions to feed [the poor], and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me *nothing*’ (1 Cor 13:2-3).
- 3 V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976) 23-36.
- 4 Ieromonach Roman, <<http://tropinka.orthodoxy.ru/zal/poezija/roman/index.htm>> [accessed 5 November 2012].
- 5 Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 23-24. In European theological life, the most famous apophatic sources were the writings of St. John of the Cross and the anonymous *The Cloud of Unknowing*.
- 6 Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 4:15-19. It is relevant to remember that the Ten Commandments belong to the eternal ordinances. It would be just as inconceivable for Protestants to break the prohibition concerning ‘sacred images’ as it would be absurd to cast doubt on the commands not to use God’s name in vain, not to commit adultery, not to steal, etc.
- 7 2 Kings 19:16; Psalm 17:6.
- 8 Ezra 5:5; Psalm 33:18.
- 9 Numbers 12:8; Isaiah 58:14.
- 10 Exodus 24:11; Acts 2:33
- 11 Exodus 24:10; Luke 20:43.
- 12 Ruth 2:12; Psalm 17:8.
- 13 Psalm 91:4.
- 14 Although some people try to do it on the level of comics today.
- 15 Hebrews 13:14; Philippians 3:20.
- 16 F. Tiutchev, *Stikhotvoreniia* [Poetry] (Moscow: Pravda, 1978) 108.
- 17 Even John Calvin, famous for his extreme strictness toward all ‘secular’ things, wrote: ‘And yet I am not gripped by the superstition of thinking absolutely no images are permissible. But because sculpture and painting are gifts of God, I seek a pure and



- legitimate use of each...’ Calvin allowed the use of creative talents outside the religious realm to depict historical events, people and nature; he even considered it useful and aesthetically pleasant. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973) I, 112.
- 18 Gregory Palamas (fourteenth century) and his followers solved this problem by separating God’s essence (which cannot be comprehended and portrayed) and his ‘energies’ (which are efficaciously displayed in any theophany even by means of material objects, for instance icons). See J. Meyendorff, *Zhizn’ i trudy Svyatitelia Grigoriia Palamy. Vvedenie v izuchenie* [Life and works of the Blessed Gregory of Palamas: Introduction to the study] (St. Petersburg: Byzantinorossica, 1997). Yet we cannot help but notice a hidden theological attempt to give preference to the cataphatic method of knowing God. For if the matter is put this way, people still ‘see God’ not as he is, but in the extremely simplified form in which the Unfathomable One reveals himself to humans who cannot comprehend his fullness. This also relates to God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, who was certainly visible as Man and incomprehensible as God.
  - 19 This biblical fact was pointed out by Byzantine theologians more than once during the iconoclast movement in the eighth century, but also long before them; John Chrysostom e.g. taught: ‘How many today say, “I wish I could see the face of Christ, His image, clothing, shoes.” Lo! Thou seest Him [in the Eucharist], Thou touchest Him, thou eatest Him. And thou indeed desirest to see His clothes, but He giveth Himself to thee not to see only, but also to touch and eat...’ (*Homily 82 on the Gospel of Matthew*) <[http://oldes.tstu.ru/orthodox/library/mirror/ccel/Zlatmat2/Mat2\\_82.html](http://oldes.tstu.ru/orthodox/library/mirror/ccel/Zlatmat2/Mat2_82.html)> [accessed 6 November 2012].
  - 20 Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20, and so on.
  - 21 ‘And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons (*neque confundentes personas*) nor dividing the substance (*neque substantiam seperantes*).’ <[http://inokinf.by.ru/docs/symbols/athanas\\_latin.html?extract=1129550216](http://inokinf.by.ru/docs/symbols/athanas_latin.html?extract=1129550216)> [accessed 6 November 2012].
  - 22 ‘We teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man... This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly (*ἀσυγχύτως*), immutably (*ἀτρέπτως*), indivisibly (*ἀδιαίρετως*), inseparably (*ἀχωρίστως*).’ See A. Kartashev, *Vselenskii sobory* [The ecumenical councils] (Moscow: Respublica, 1994) 273.
  - ‘Defining all this we likewise declare that in him are two natural wills and two natural operations indivisibly (*ἀδιαίρετως*), inconvertibly (*ἀτρέπτως*), inseparably (*ἀμειρίστως*), unconfusedly (*ἀσυγχύτως*), according to the teaching of the holy Fathers. And these two natural wills are not contrary the one to the other (God forbid!) as the impious heretics assert, but his human will follows and that not as resisting and reluctant, but rather as subject to his divine and omnipotent will.’ See V. Bolotov, *Lektsii po istorii drevnei Tserkvi* [Lectures on the history of the ancient Church], 4 vols. (Moscow, 1994) v. IV, 498-499.
  - 23 See <<http://svitlo.by.ru/biblioteka/luter/vavilon.htm>> [accessed 23 December 2011].
  - 24 M. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 1125.
  - 25 G. Kretschmar, ‘Sviatoe prichastie soglasno ucheniiu i ukladu Liutetskoi Tserkvi’ [Holy communion according to the teaching and structure of the Lutheran Church], *Der Bote: Zhurnal Evangelicheskoi-Lutetskoi Tserkvi* [The messenger: Journal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church] 1 (2002) 8.
  - 26 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1126-1128.
  - 27 Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we read Paul’s words that Jesus, breaking bread, said, ‘this is my body’, not some abstract or ‘spiritual’ body, but the one which ‘is broken for you’ (1 Cor 11:24).
  - 28 It is said about the Eucharistic cup, ‘This is My Blood of the new covenant’ and, again, it is not some imaginary blood, but the blood that ‘is poured out for many’ (Mk 14:24).
  - 29 The expression ‘without any transubstantiation’ can again be compared with the negative adverb *ἀτρέπτως* (‘immutably,’ ‘inconvertibly’) from the creeds of the Fourth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils.
  - 30 N.D. Uspensky, ‘Anafora (Opyt istoriko-liturgicheskogo analiza)’ [Anafora (An Attempt at historical-liturgical analysis)], *Bogoslovskie trudy* vol. 13 (1975) 125-147.
  - 31 For example, the classical work of Metropolitan Makary, most frequently quoted by domestic theologians, tells about the sacrament of the Eucharist exclusively as transubstantiation or its synonyms, *prelozhenie* and *pretvorenie*. See Metropolitan Makary (Bulgakov), *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie* [The Orthodox-Dogmatic Theology, 1883], 2 vols. (Moscow: Palomnik, 1999) v. II.367, 385, 396.
  - 32 ‘Bread does not transmute invisibly, deceptively for the senses into the body of Christ, but in a Chalcedonian way unites with him, with God the incarnate Word, communes with him just as he took upon himself the human nature of incarnation’ (A. I. Osipov, ‘Evkhariistia i sviashchenstvo’ [Eucharist and priesthood] <<http://www.sedmitza.ru/index>



- html?sid=253&did=3971&p\_comment=&call\_action= print1(default)> [accessed 10 November 2012]. For criticism of this work, see for example: Archimandrite Rafail (Karelin), 'Eshche raz o ereticheskikh zabliuzhdeniiakh professora MDA, A. I. Osipova' [More on the heretical errors of Professor MDA, A. I. Osipov], <<http://theologym.narod.ru/rafail.htm>> [accessed 10 November 2012].
- 33 It is curious to note that a similar idea is present in the Orthodox *Drevnii paterik* [Ancient patristics], 18.4 (published in 1899). Actually, the church editor comments on it in the context as 'an obvious vision from the devil'. See <<http://www.krotov.info/acts/04/0399ptr6.html>> [accessed 6 November 2012].
  - 34 Here we may remember the 'transubstantiation' of water into blood by Moses and Aaron in Egypt (Ex 7:19-21), and water into wine by Christ during the wedding in Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-10). It is worth noting that neither the blood in Egypt nor the wine in Cana were imaginary, but genuine, tasting (and probably in colour, looking) like blood (Ex 7:18.21) and wine (Jn 2:9-10). It is hardly godly after such examples to pose the question of the 'expedience' of turning wine into blood, or blood into wine by our Lord.
  - 35 It is quite possible, sparing the feelings of 'unbending' Protestants, to go without mentioning transubstantiation. In other words, whoever sees only the bread and the cup of wine during communion partakes of only bread and wine, not completely realising the sacrament of communing in the Body and Blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). However, communion takes place with each sincere Christian anyway; and whoever sees Jesus himself in the Lord's Supper, partaking of the same bread and wine, is already consciously communing in his broken body and pure blood poured out for sinners.
  - 36 Ephraim the Syrian, 'Protiv issledovatelei estestva Syna Bozhia' [Against researchers of the nature of the Son of God]. <<http://www.pagez.ru/lsn/0451.php>> [accessed 6 November 2012].
  - 37 The lyrics of hymns 114 and 440 from the collection *Pesn' vozrozhdeniia* [Song of Revival, 1978], in particular, include the following lines: 'To behold You with our eyes // is not granted to us, sinners, but to embrace by faith // with love we can, although invisible // You give inexpressible // delight to the soul ...'; 'Oh, immeasurable love // deed wonderful and holy, // unfathomable goodness // my mind cannot comprehend. // Lamb, offered as a sacrifice! // How can I reward you // for the unspeakable gift?' Such apophatic ideas are present in many other hymns in the main worship book of domestic Baptists; see e.g. numbers 66, 91, 98, 108 and 187.
  - 38 I remember an old presbyter in a Baptist church in Omsk (Russia), who artlessly said to his congregation during the Lord's Supper, 'Please be careful, brothers and sisters, not to spill the blood of Christ!'
  - 39 Regarding illnesses, by the way, it is common to hear something like the following from church ministers: 'It still hasn't happened that anyone ever became ill because of taking Communion from the common cup ("they say this is unsanitary"); on the contrary, we often hear about illnesses being healed...' In addition, the traditional domestic Baptist churches do not consider the 'holy kiss' after the Lord's Supper allegorically at all, and it is still widely practised in Russia, reluctantly giving way to the Western practice of the ordinary hand-clasp.
  - 40 On this topic see the excellent work by S.V. Sannikov, 'Vecheria Gospodnia' [The Lord's Supper], *Almanakh Bogomyslie* 1 (1990) 65-116.
  - 41 Where, obviously, Western theology, which is not always acceptable to the Russian Baptist brotherhood, prevails.