

# Description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries

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**Abstract.** The article presents the factors influencing the description of mystic experience in the works of Russian religious philosophers of the 19th-20th centuries: V.S. Solovyev, P.A. Florenskiy, S.N. Bulgakov, N.O. Losskiy, I.A. Ilyin, S.L. Frank, V.V. Zenkovskiy. The authors cite several western and contemporary domestic scholars, who research different aspects of mystic experience. Analysis and generalization of works of Russian religious thinkers allows the authors to identify the peculiar features of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy of the 19th-20th centuries and list its objects. The article gives examples of acquiring mystic experience described in the works of Russian religious philosophers of XIX-XX centuries. The authors come to a conclusion that doctrine of deification or theosis is recognized in Russian religious philosophy of the 19th-20th centuries as the main mystic teaching of Eastern Christianity. General ideas of deification peculiar to Russian religious thinkers are also stated and conditions necessary to acquire this mystic experience are named in the article.

## Introduction

The issue of acquiring mystic experience in different religious traditions was in the view of Western scholars many times. In this regard, it suffices to recall the names of W. James, M. Eliade, C.G. Jung, G. Scholem, E. Dodds, E. Pagels, who dedicated their scientific works to research of different aspects of mystic experience. Despite the difficulties that authors have to face due to specific nature of this issue, it remains popular among contemporary domestic researchers – P.I. Gurevich, S.G. Gutova, I.I. Evlampiev, V.B. Aleksandrov, V.V. Kravchenko, E.V. Zolotukhina, A.M. Mironova and many others. The issue of the origin of mystic experience is also of certain interest to contemporary scholars. Thus, according to V.B. Aleksandrov, PhD, Professor, in the present-day Russian society there are two established positions relating to explanation of mystic experience: “The first one considers mystic experience as a feature of ill consciousness, whereas the second position explains mystic experience with the worldview that has remained in the consciousness of mankind throughout its existence” (Aleksandrov, 2015, 136). In our opinion, factors that influence the description of mystic experience in the works of representatives of Russian religious

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philosophy, identification of peculiar features typical of mystic experience description and conditions of its acquisition remain insufficiently studied in the works of Russian religious thinkers of the 19th-20th centuries.

## **Specific nature of methodology**

The following methods are used as research methods in the article - analysis, synthesis, historical, descriptive, comparative and hermeneutical methods of scientific research. Due to the use of general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, the objects of mystic experience are identified in the works of Russian religious philosophers of the 19th-20th centuries. The use of historical and descriptive methods is caused by specific nature of the researched material – texts of philosophers of the 19th-20th centuries, it helps single out peculiar features of mystic experience in the works of Russian religious thinkers by means of unification of the stated ideas, as well as give examples of acquiring mystic experience basing on the results on the research. The comparative research method gives an opportunity to compare opinions of Russian religious philosophers on mystic experience and identify deification as the main mystic teaching of Eastern Christianity. The use of the hermeneutical method makes it possible to look deep into the meaning of the text, interpret the doctrines of mystic experience of representatives of Russian religious philosophy.

## **Mystic experience of religious philosophy**

Inter alia, the following factors influenced the description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy of the 19th-20th centuries: closeness of views of Russian religious thinkers to Eastern Christianity, depth of mystic experience, intellectual level of human development, impact of supernatural forces, Gnostics doctrine as well as the fine arts of the European Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Many ideas of Russian religious thinkers were adopted from Eastern-Christian theology and then were developed in the works of P.A. Florenskiy, S.N. Bulgakov, N.O. Losskiy, I.A. Ilyin, S.L. Frank and V.V. Zenkovskiy. One of the features was the assertion of understatement and difficulty to express mystic experience through language means. In this regard, it suffices to recall the apophatic theology as a way of God cognition through recitation of names not applied to Him. S.N. Bulgakov writes that “afterlife, life of the next century is covered with mystery...” (Archpriest Sergey Bulgakov, 2014), and even if a person received a Revelation about what expects him/her in the afterlife, for reasons beyond his/her control he/she is not able to tell the others about it; similar ideas were repeatedly expressed by other Russian religious thinkers.

The next factor that influenced significantly the description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy was depth of experience. N.O. Losskiy underlined that mystic experience “... is difficult to describe and it is clear that people describe their feelings differently exactly as a result of subjectivity of their religious experience” (N.O. Losskiy 2000, 504) hereby expressing the idea of impossibility of complete transfer of personal mystic experience. The stronger the impact made by mystic experience on the person, the more difficult it is to share it with the others. Difficulty in speaking about mystic experience is proved by the following words of S.L. Frank addressed to his brother: “Listen, — he said to me, — tonight I experienced something very extraordinary, something amazing. I was lying and suffering and suddenly I felt that my sufferings and sufferings of Christ are the same sufferings... Earthly forms of wine and bread are nothing in comparison to what I had; and I fell into bliss. How strange it is what I have got through: this is just beyond everything I have been thinking about all my life. How has it suddenly

come to me?" (Bubbaier F., 2001, 254).

One more factor that influenced the description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy was the intellectual level of human development. Russian religious philosophers believed that there was dependence between education, environment and intellectual level of human development as a whole and the way a person described his/her mystic feelings.

Another factor that influenced the description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy could be the impact of supernatural forces that hindered to describe the acquired mystic experience in details, which was written about by S.N. Bulgakov and P.A. Florenskiy: "It is unspeakable", "... a person should not speak about it". It is not like you are not able to speak, but you must not, perhaps because any word about it will turn out, according to Tyutchev, "a lie" and will be in fact "true but really not true" (P.A. Florenskiy, 1996, 599).

Description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy also was greatly influenced by Gnostic doctrine. The first Christians used the term "gnosis" to speak about knowledge received as a result of mystic experience acquisition. Later, they began to treat the gnostic as a person, who was involved in the search for salvation in a spirit through acquisition of special knowledge. It is important to note that knowledge received as a result of mystic experience could not be treated as accumulated information, since it was irrational in nature. Thus, God cognition that can be reached by a person is described in the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians: "For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (4.6). Knowledge of Gnostics based on the special type of experience uses different images and symbols, claims to a deeper insight into the "essence" of the divine as compared to the knowledge obtained through the mind. According to Gnostics, true knowledge about the nature of the Universe and the Human cannot come from rational thinking or using "someone else's" truths. Obtaining gnostic knowledge is an intuitive process including self-understanding and knowledge of divine reality. The Gnostic doctrine, developed on the basis of such individual feelings, characterized by a certain attitude to life and reality, had a significant influence on the description of mystic experience in the works of Russian religious thinker V.S. Solovyev. V.S. Solovyev did not hide his sympathy to this doctrine, he wrote: "The Gnostic worldview compares favourably with all pre-Christian wisdom due to the idea of a certain and common efficient world process..." (V.S. Solovyev, 1992, 325). V.S. Solovyev considers that to know God is possible only if HE HIMSELF wants to reveal to a person, from revelation, the mind is not able to get the knowledge about God without divine will. "Nature incomprehensible for the mind can be subject of mystic contemplation, specific intellectual intuition ...", which is similar to inspiration according to V.S. Solovyev. (P.P. Gaydenko, 2014, 517). The philosopher equated the "creative act with passive and mediumistic" trance (P.P. Gaydenko, 2014, 518), described his own mystic experience of meeting Saint Sophia and obtaining specific knowledge. Later, the gnostic ideas were developed in the work of another religious thinker, esoteric scientist G.I. Gurdzhiev and his followers. G.I. Gurdzhiev called his doctrine "esoteric Christianity": "I don't know what you know about Christianity ... It will take a lot of conversations during a long time to find out what you understand by this word. But for the sake of those who already know I will tell that this is esoteric Christianity" (P.D. Uspenskiy, 12, 2010). According to G.I. Gurdzhiev, the human cannot get to know himself with the state of contemporary mankind today, there are too many distracting factors appearing on his way. Self-observation can become a closer goal as it is a way leading to self-knowledge and consequently it is work.

Another important factor that influenced the description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy is the fine arts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which

contributed to creation of images of supernatural beings: angels, demons, departed souls and other representatives of the transcendent world in believers' consciousness. Representatives of Russian religious philosophy P.A. Florenskiy and S.N. Bulgakov claim that death appears before the dying person in the form of a supernatural being that causes this state with the help of bladed weapon. The image of death described by these thinkers has many features similar to medieval images of death and death in the pictures of the Renaissance artists. Thus, talking about the image of death P.A. Florenskiy mentions the picture by A. Durer "Knight, Death and Devil" where death is depicted as a skeleton with a trident. According to French historian J. Delumeau, formation of such an image of death in medieval Europe was influenced by impressions received from the view of decaying bodies of people, who died as a result of plague, famine and numerous wars. According to the scholar's words, there were so many dead people that it was impossible to bury all the bodies within a short time. In time, people began to notice that human bones were less subject to decay than the flesh, which caused formation of the image of death in the form of a skeleton.

S.N. Bulgakov in *The Life beyond the Grave* gave a description of mystic experience of observing the soul of a deceased person. He states that at the moment of person's death there happens a separation of some "transparent cover" that looks like the body itself.

According to doctrines of Russian religious philosophers, short duration and logical incompleteness are characteristic features of mystic experience. In other words, mystic experience cannot last long and lead to an expected result. I.A. Ilyin wrote about logical incompleteness of mystic experience and the absence of doctrines in it.

In the writings of representatives of Russian religious philosophy, the Saints, monks, children, people who were between life and death appeared as objects of mystic experience. Thus, P.A. Florenskiy points out that children and people between life and death have the ability to see beings of the otherworld, i.e. they can be the objects of mystic experience; he also calls this ability a "double sight". N.O. Losskiy and other thinkers wrote that in history the Saints who went through a lot of mystic experience were used as its objects. Besides dying people, children, monks and the Saints, Russian religious thinkers themselves often became objects of mystic experience in their writings, as they described their own mystic experience.

## Divine Grace

Doctrine of deification was acknowledged by Russian religious thinkers as the "main mystic teaching of the Eastern Church", as they believed that the human was revealed his mission on Earth exactly in the doctrine. S.L. Frank believes that deification means acquiring of mystic experience of human's unity with God. N.O. Losskiy and I.A. Ilyin define the essence of this mystic experience as sending of divine energy to a human. For P.A. Florenskiy and V.V. Zenkovskiy, deification was the highest value of human life. Possibility of acquisition of mystical experience of deification is mentioned in the Gospel according to St. John: "They may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21-23). The deification doctrine was practiced by monks-hesychasts, who believed that it was possible to reach contact with God with the help of "mental doing" or prayer. A prayer is "that inner wealth that is close to all mystics of all religions, that inner self-absorption, that opens a "hidden heart of a man", that shows to the man of faith "the logos of the creature", i.e. approximate meaning and artistic concept of the divine plan of world creation" (Cyprian, 2004, 10). Cyprian believed that it was not important where and how to say a prayer. A silent prayer perfectly conveys a cry of a person's heart, it consists in

constant repetition of God's name, in "rejoicing it and contemplation of uncreated God's energies in it, as it is given by God to the cleansed heart of a man of faith" (Cyprian, 2004, 10).

One of the main research problems that Russian religious thinkers of the 19th-20th centuries had was determination of conditions for acquisition of mystic experience of deification: according to N.O. Losskiy, to acquire mystic experience human's own forces are not enough, it requires forces of a different order, which would overpower own human forces. Thus, among the conditions for acquisition of mystic experience of deification N.O. Losskiy names acquiring of Divine Grace in the Church, which causes the man, who is filled with its beams, to transform not only physically but spiritually as well. A crucial role in the possibility to acquire deification experience was assigned by the philosopher to acknowledgement of own imperfection by a human and addressing to God through a prayer. Thus, the philosopher names the prayer together with acknowledgement of "littleness" of a human as conditions for acquisition of this mystic experience. Among the conditions for acquisition of mystic experience of deification I.A. Ilyin names prayer and purification of soul. Mystic experience can be acquired under conditions of inner concentration of a human that is necessary to make spiritual work of cognition to reach certain states of consciousness. Besides, according to contemporary researchers, a significant role in acquisition of mystic experience can be played by certain music, incenses, rituals, rites and ceremonial actions.

## Conclusion

Thus, monks, the Saints, children and thinkers themselves, as well as people between life and death became objects of mystic experience in the writings of Russian religious thinkers of the 19th-20th centuries. According to the teaching of Russian religious philosophers, mystic experience has the following features: it is difficult to express in language, it is short in time and logically incomplete. As an example of acquisition of mystic experience, Russian religious thinkers gave meeting of a dying person with death in the form of a skeleton wrapped in grave clothes, meeting of a person with the soul of the dead, deification, meeting with Saint Sophia, other mystic experience, they also mentioned mystic experience of meeting with angels, demons and other beings from the otherworld. Russian religious thinkers considered deification to be the main mystic doctrine of Eastern Christianity and named a number of conditions necessary for its acquisition: acquisition of divine grace, acknowledgement of own imperfection, confession, prayer and inner concentration.

The description of mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy is influenced by a number of factors among which there are the following:

1. Closeness of doctrine of Russian religious philosophers to Eastern Christian theology claiming impossibility of speaking about mystic experience in full by means of the language;
2. Strong felt experience. The bigger impression had the person in mystic experience, the more difficult it was to tell others about it;
3. Intellectual level of human development. Each person is able to tell about his/her experience differently subject to his/her intellectual development, education and environment;
4. Possibility to share mystic experience when a dying person meets death is complicated because of the impact of supernatural forces that do not let the person tell about what is happening to him/her before death;
5. The doctrine of gnostic scientists about special knowledge reached through self-

cognition influenced greatly the description of mystic experience in the writings of V.S. Solovyev and many other representatives of Russian religious philosophy of the 19th-20th centuries, including G. Gurdzhiev;

6. The fine arts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance influence the description of images of supernatural beings that appear in mystic experience in Russian religious philosophy.

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