



IS CHRISTIAN NATURAL PHILOSOPHY POSSIBLE?

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The ultimate goal of any religious natural philosophy is to demonstrate the ties between the Divinity, the Creator and the material world, the reflections of the Supreme Being in the created Cosmos, the traces of Providence in the evolution by means of scientific data and in the language of natural science.

There are some important premises, which precede all religious metaphysics of that kind. First of all — epistemological optimism, that is the belief in capability of human mind to conceive the general plan of the Universe and, implicitly, God's will and forms of action, “the paths of the Lord” (Ps. XXV, 10). Moreover, these premises include the belief in adequacy of scientific language, its terms, conceptions and formulas to express this knowledge.

Confronted with prophecy, religious natural philosophy seems to be even more daring, for the prophets were plunged in search for proper words to express their experience of vision “through a glass, darkly” (I Cor. XIII, 12), but the philosophers receive their language beforehand.

In any case, Christian natural philosophy really pretends to be a form of prophecy put in a specific technical language.

There are at least two main streams in religious natural philosophy which have basically different grounds, methods and points of departure.

One is based on the search for and interpretation of scientific data, that can support recital of the Bible. It has the air of being bound to Scripture literally.

The other seems to be more detached and open for different scientific hypotheses, even for those, which may sound disaccording with the Bible.

It is very important to realize that the main types of religious natural philosophy differ in understanding of the essence of Christian Revelation.

The first regards the Holy Scripture as a source of all truth about man and Earth, free from mistakes, inadequate expressions of human language, accommodations to human mind of a certain historical epoch.

The second is more flexible and hypothetic, ready for metaphorical interpretation and historical criticism of the Bible, open to new theories and ideas.

It is evident, that this opposition is ideal, and in reality one usually comes across certain mixture of both types. But the basic difference remains: in one case Christian doctrine is considered to be indispensably linked with a certain philosophy of nature, in the other the links are optional or irrelevant.

Not only judges of Galileo, but also R.F.Pavel Florensky in his “Mnimosti v geometrii” (“Imaginary in geometry”, 1922) has given a striking example of the first type, regarding Ptolemaic system as a constituting part of Christian world view.

Just an opposite attitude is demonstrated by Prof. Vladimir Il'yin (“Six days of Creation”, Paris, 1930, in Russ.), who regards Christianity open to different hypotheses in cosmology, biology and so on.

Perhaps a somewhat strange idea has been recently expressed by bishop Basil (Rodzyanko) in his book “The theory of the collapse of the Universe and the faith of the Church-fathers” (Moscow, 1996, in Russ.). Bishop Basil claims, that the crucial problems of natural philosophy of our days, including the theory of the Big Bang, based on the phenomenon of red shift, were non only foreseen, but even in general resolved by the Church-fathers of the IV-th century, namely Basil the Great, Gregory from Nyssa and others.

We must admit, that this claim is rather emotional, devoid of solid arguments and conceptual analysis and arose from a sincere belief of the reverend bishop that Christianity is all truth about man and Universe and that the Church-fathers could not be deprived of any part of it.

Were the apostles of Christ and their successors really interested in cosmology and the doctrine of evolution?

Many attempts to develop Christian natural philosophy are based on “Commentary on Hexameron” by Basil the Great (IV-th cent.). But this saint in the last part of his work pointed out, that Moses did not discuss such “idle subjects” as the form and circumference of the Earth, the nature of lunar eclipse and so on. St.Basil touches the matter of natural philosophy only in connection with his moral aims, as an occasion to remind of the Creator. Moreover, the bishop of Caesaria remarks, that self-knowledge is more important for the knowledge of God than speculations about heaven and earth.

One of the famous western theologians of the IX-th century John Scot Eriugena in his work “De natura” (“On nature”), continuing the tradition of Cappadocian fathers, is also inspired rather by metaphysical than direct cosmological aims. This is evident, for example, from his treatment of the category “place” (topos) which, according to Eriugena, exists only in the spiritual world! He believes, that locus is given only in the soul (non esse locum nisi in animo) as “the action of mind”. Space, so dear for the physicists, doesn't exist as objective reality!

The “division of nature” by Eriugena departs from metaphysical premises and has nothing to do with experimental science.

In this context we can remind Sir Isaac Newton who in his search for mathematical principles of natural philosophy did not forget the Creator and suggested interpretation of space as an organ of God's sensitivity (sensorium Dei). One might seek for

compromise between this idea and philosophy of Eriugena, but possible objections should be taken into account. They are relevant for all forms of religious natural philosophy.

Newton's idea has evident anthropomorphic sense, it implies the notion of God's "members", the division of His essence and so on. Not only Eriugena, but also the author of the so called Areopagitics and Nicolaus Cusanus were severely opposed to such way of thinking. They belong to the tradition of Apophatic, or Negative theology, which denies all determinations of the Supreme Being by sensual analogies, anthropomorphous correspondences, space-time relations and professes the Creator incognizable entity beyond the reach of human language. This apophatic, or Negative theology is generally accepted by both East and West Christian Churches. Moreover, it is common for all subtle theologians of monotheistic religions — Judaism, Islam and Hinduism (it should be mentioned in brackets, that the famous Muslim scientist of the XI-th century al-Biruni was delighted by the Hindu conception of God).

Needless to say, that for Negative theology all speculations about "God in Nature" are very relative as well as scientific hypotheses about heaven and earth. Nicolaus Cusanus was not an adept of Ptolemaic system, neither was he of heliocentric one. On the contrary, the evolutional ideas of R.P.Teillard de Chardin were at first rejected and later ardently accepted by Catholic Church, but perhaps permanent abstinence would be a more adequate position.

Is not it high time now to recall epistemological prudence of Kant? After a period of cosmogonic enthusiasm he came to the conclusion, that Ding-an-Sich, things as they exist apart from our perception are incognizable, our understanding is contradictory, space and time are innate ideas (something familiar with Eriugena) and precede all our experience. Kant's generalizations may be easily transposed to theology, and they leave no place for religious natural philosophy. Not the exploration of an exterior world, but self-understanding, the study of human mind and soul is, according to Kant, the first task of man.

In one line with Kant's assertions it lies the idea of some modern psychologists, that personal attitude towards the Transcendental Being is innate to man (as Tertullian much earlier put it, the soul of man is Christian according to its nature), and anthropomorphous vision of the Creator is inherent in speculations of natural apologetics. Even very experienced theologians are often inclined to imagine God anthropomorphically, the same happens to naturalists speaking about the Lord as an ingenier, a constructor, i.e. ideal reflection of themselves... Don't they hear the words of the Lord, addressed to Job: "*Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.*

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?" (Job, XXXVIII, 4-5).

The vicious circle of religious speculations about nature consists in the tendency to prove the existence of God, the Creator, accepted and imagined beforehand.

One more aspect should be taken into account. There is nothing specifically “Christian” in multiform manifestations of natural philosophy, which adopt creationism. For creationism does not constitute differentia specific of Christianity. And the attempts by some scholars of the present century (for example, pioneers of rocketry Konstantine Tsiolkovsky and Hermann Ganswindt) ¹ to lay “scientific foundations” of Christian religion belong rather to atomistic and stoic than church tradition.

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God revealed Himself as a Creator, but He left us no chance to understand by what means or how directly He created the Universe. He has shown Himself responsive to human prayers and has given us a hope that the destiny of the world can be changed.

God revealed Himself as a Spectator of His own work, but He left us no formal criterion for judgement about perfection of His masterpiece.

God revealed Himself as Love, which transcends Heaven and Earth, but He left us no hint, that speculations about harmony of numbers could help us approach Him.

The Christian natural philosophy is impossible. But it exists despite its impossibility. Perhaps, we should take it as a form of religious poetry with a specific language and connotations. This poetry sometimes is provoked by sincere religious feeling, but rather often it is due to mere illusions and misunderstandings.

¹25 years ago I have compared their ideas in an article, published in: "Iz istorii aviatsii i kosmonavtiki" (Vol.25, Moskva, 1975, pp.39-50). Unfortunately, "theological" motives were eliminated by the editors.