

ON THE ROLE OF THE BODY IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Ivica Živković

Nis, Serbia

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SUMMARY

In his critique of the excessive influences of the personalistic philosophy on the theological construct that some of the most significant orthodox authors of the present are guided by, Jean-Claude Larchet widely explains why the relation of the christian toward the body in the spiritual education of the more recent generations of the orthodox christians is vastly neglected. On another place he exposes a voluminous summary of the orthodox church tradition on the christian faith as a method of healing the passions, picturing the role of the traditional christian terms ascetism, athletics and agon (struggle) in the orthodox theology and advocating for the neccessity of their reafirmation in the christian upbringing of the modern people. The physical culture of the orthodox christians should be determined in the shape of explication of the christian endeavour as bodily discipline, considering the neccessary role of the body in bringing up the virtues, and also the importance of healing the body from the passions and other forms of attachment as the disorders of spiritual health.

Key words: theology, tradition, body, passion, healing, discipline, askesis, struggle

Correspondence author

Ivica Živković
ivica.zzivkovic@gmail.com

Jean-Claude Larchet is one of the most eminent living orthodox theologists. The French by nationality, he lives and works in Strasbourg, holding the close relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Besides all, he is a long-standing associate of the Center for Church Studies, the organization of the scientifically explorers from Niš, and also a member of the international editorial staff of the

highly quoted annual *The Church Studies*. Some of his monographs translated in Serbian have been edited by the Center of Church Studies and the International Center of Orthodox Studies from Niš. Here we shall try to take certain consequences out of his works that refer to the issue of the role of the body in christian spirituality, primarily following his titles: "Person and Nature", edited 2016. and "Healing the Spiritual Diseases", co-published with *Officiary Herald* 2017, as well as the essay "Theology of the Body", which Serbian translation was published 2003.

The first of these monographs contains the critique of personalism, rather the personalistic philosophical afflatus, in the doctrine of Metropolitan John Zizioulas. This controversy is important for us for two reasons. John Zizioulas is the author and patron of the theological construct that dominates in church education and theological thought of the neoteric orthodox Christians over here. The programs of all the actual theological studies, as well as the religious education in Serbia, are composed according to the concept of the liturgical doctrine of the church, which leading exponent is John Zizioulas. This stream is responsible, besides all, for the reduction and largely for the denial of the real importance of the role of the body in Christian spirituality.

In the other book, "Healing the Spiritual Diseases. Introduction to the ascetical tradition of the Orthodox church", Jean-Claude Larchet from many angles presents what the importance actually is attached to the body and bodily aspects in the church elders' tradition, albeit the issue is, for the above mentioned reasons, is suppressed in the modern orthodox education.

In the transparent article "Thology of the Body", Larchet represents the body as a dimension of human personality and the means of the communication with neighbor. He criticizes the modern naturalistic treatment of the body in medicine, media and marketing. He explains in detail the Christian comprehension of the relation between the spirit and the flesh, which has kept, according to his words, the actual validity to help us to give sense to our body in a time and civilization that lost their criteria. Then he writes on the importance of Christ's incarnation (that means taking the body), his transfiguration, death and resurrection in recovery of the mankind, as well as on the effect of spiritual life on the body and what it means the deificated and transfigured, respectively the risen body of a human being.

Given the Larchet's critique of Zizioulas, that not only in Serbia but in our city of Niš has triggered the divided opinions, the modern Christian doctrine, personalized in the attitudes of John Zizioulas, does not demonstrate what a man should or could do with his body throughout his spiritual development. Modern believers do not get even elementary ideas about that today, during their studies at the theological faculty, seminary schools or their religious education in

elementary and secondary schools. According to the doctrine of John Zizioulas, unity with God can be achieved only by participation in liturgy, based on the Holy communion. That approach refers to the God's connection with the community of people rather than with each of the believers individually. According to Larchet's warning, that leads to depreciating singular personal relationship, in the classical sense, between each of the believers with God. Then, it is a rejection of the link between the liturgical service and the personal ascetism, which Zizioulas widely appraises as the matter of pietism and individualism.

Given that comprehension, whatever has happened, the human nature is convicted to follow its way to disintegration and death as the final destruction. It is not redeemable and could not be saved. A man is considered safe only through an escape from his own nature, including his body and all related to his bodily structure.

Obvious is the lack of any idea about what the ascetical effort means within the spiritual way of life managed according to theoretical and practical doctrines of the orthodox tradition. Such a spirituality is unclear, closed to any kind of concrete and efficient practice and exercise. In such a way it becomes very distant from the classical and traditional spirituality of the Orthodox church, which offers the methodical and exact path to direct man's effort and to help him to thrive, with the help of divine grace, in his life in Christ.

As points Larche, in his encyclopedic work "healing the Spiritual Diseases", the term of ascetism in christian spirituality refers to what every Christian should execute to gain the salvation which Christ offers him. The Greek word askesis means exercise, habitude, executing, a way of life, while in Russian podvig, podviznicestvo, mean to go forward, to thrive before the others. It is about understanding the spiritual life as a flow of development, gradually carrying out the grace excepted, the process of man's recovery.

Ascetism is for the same reasons as medicine represented as an art by the old meaning of technique (another meaning of the word ascetism). It is an art of the arts and a knowledge of the knowledges. Church elders' doctrines therefore picture the ascetism in terms of struggle, fight (athlesism and agon also mean: effort, habitude), and also by the word ascesis (all the terms that are represented in theory of the physical culture). These two meanings, of technique and ascesis, complement each other, because the purpose of medicine is to attack the causes of a disease, to fight those diseases and to overcome them using strategies and remedies, while the purpose of physical exercise is to protect health.

A life of virtue is the one in which the body takes part, as the spiritual elders point. Not only there are the virtues of the body, but the body partakes at the most of the soul virtues by its capacities and energies. Observation by senses, the source of the cognition of material beings, is both the corporeal process and

the psychical one. Originally the man used all his senses normally, soundly, according to their natural purpose.

Having fallen to a sin, the body was passed on to the suffering, disease, the process of getting older and decomposition, and finally on death. The body has become material, rough and unclear, and it has come into the flow of the animal and sensual lifestyle. It has been transmuted to an object, an instrument of the satisfaction and sentiment, that are related to the pain and decay. It has been deprived of its harmony with the soul and has become the soul's burden and weight. The part of the body in sin refers to the lust and bodily smoothing. Satisfaction and pain become the principal criteria of man's reasoning and the decision that he makes. Getting closed in the round of satisfaction and suffer, tied to the sensual reality, the man lacks the possibility to get the higher, spiritual satisfaction.

Passions, also called vice, are not an integral part of human nature. They had not been joined to the divine image that the man was created to. The soul is naturally impassional, not tied to the earthly aspirations, with no weight and stiffness. When in natural state, the soul leads life to the sublime. When out of its order, nature contains the passions. Passions represent unnatural functioning of the capacities of the soul and corporal organs, their deviation, distortion, misuse and a linkage of the man to the earth.

In a wider sense, the term of ascetism can be adapted to the notion of praxis (work), ie exercise. At the beginning of the list of all the procedure that constitute the ascetism, it is necessary to specify the shape of fast, vigilance, hard work, bowing down to earth during the prayer. There can be joined all the efforts that man voluntarily undertakes, or that he downloads when they suddenly appear: suffering diseases, difficulties and various tribulations that he can endure during his earthly life. "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger" (2 Cor. 6. 4-5). In accordance with the experience lasting centuries of the Christian ascetics, that praxis helps the soul to strengthen and to become spiritually more sensitive.

The man has diverted from spiritual reality and turned to the sensual one, feeling from now on some kind of unreasonable affection, straining to satisfy its concupiscence, in other words falling into self-love or egoism, mother of all passions. Physical ascetism helps reversing that course.

By the severe, disciplined treatment of the body, ascetism directly resists self-love and at the same time nails passions that come out of it, giving advantage to appearance of the virtues which suit them. A long-term commitment to an effort (philoponia) expels the yielding to pleasures (philedonia). One saturation then suppresses another. Through ascetism the man becomes unsensitive to the

bodily attachments. He overcomes the inertia and grows into virtues. The role of the body in gaining virtues is clear: the more someone gets free from corporal passions and linkage, the more he advances the soul virtues.

High-fed and restful body gives the man the wrong impression of a fullness and autonomy, which instill the pride into him. Ascetism, by calming his body down, envisages its real fragility, its momentary natural malaise, the sign of transience of his physical and earthly existence, relativity of his being, and so it leads him to sobriety.

Christian faith means no contempt to the body, but on the contrary calls for its appreciation as a full member of human composition, which is created by God and is good by nature in its integrity, and also, along with the soul, designed for resurrection and cognition of deification. Body by itself is not an obstacle for the spiritual life and it is not a prison or a grave for the soul. The grave is a soul which submits itself to its passionate concupiscence. The struggle should be directed against that passionate concupiscence. Spiritual ascetism aims not at the body itself, but at its passions and vice, and its most exalted goal is life in God. Restoring the rule over his body, mastering of spirit and reason, through the virtue of restraint and moderation, the man opens up for the spiritual actions and his body gets into the heavenly state, for which he was originally created.

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ПРАВОСЛАВНИ ТЕОЛОГ ЖАН-КЛОД ЛАРШЕ О УЛОЗИ ТЕЛА У ХРИШЋАНСКОЈ ДУХОВНОСТИ

САЖЕТАК

У својој критици прекомерних утицаја персоналистичке филозофије на теолошки конструкт којим се руководе неки од најзначајнијих савремених православних аутора, Жан-Клод Ларше умногоме објашњава због чега је однос хришћана према телу у духовном образовању новијих генерација православних хришћана у великој мери запостављен. На другом месту он даје опсежан преглед православног црквеног предања о хришћанској вери као методу исцељења људског бића од страсти, представљајући улогу традиционалних хришћанских појмова аскезе, атлетике и агона (борбе) у православној теологији и позивајући на неопходност њихове реафирмације у црквеном васпитању савремених људи. Физичка култура православних хришћана одређује се у оквиру тумачења хришћанског подвижништва као телесне дисциплине, с обзиром на неопходну улогу тела у изградњи врлина, као и важност исцељења тела од страсти и других облика везаности као поремећаја духовног здравља.

Кључне речи: теологија, предање, тело, страст, исцељење, дисциплина, аскеза, борба

ПРАВОСЛАВНЫЙ ТЕОЛОГ ЖАН-КЛОД ЛАРШЕ О РОЛИ ТЕЛА В ХРИСТИАНСКОЙ ДУХОВНОСТИ

Аннотация

В своей критике чрезмерного влияния персоналистической философии на теологический конструкт, которым руководят некоторые из важнейших современных православных авторов, Жан-Клод Ларше объясняет в значительной степени, почему отношение христиан к телу в духовном воспитании новых поколений православных христиан во многом пренебрегается. В другом месте он дает всесторонний обзор Православной религиозной традиции о христианской вере, как методе исцеления человека от страсти, представляя роль традиционных христианских представлений об аскетизме, легкой атлетике и агонии в православном богословии и призывая к необходимости их подтверждения в церковном воспитании современного

человечества. Физическая культура православных христиан определяется в рамках трактовки христианского аскетизма как физической дисциплины, учитывая необходимую роль тела в развитии добродетелей, а также важность исцеления тела от страсти и других форм привязанности как расстройства духовного здоровья.

Ключевые слова: богословие, миф/легенда, тело, страсть, исцеление, дисциплина, аскетизм, борьба.

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