

CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

Insights from a Neglected Russian Theologian

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ALTHOUGH THE terms used in traditional Christian eschatology are known in all the languages of the West, terms such as Second Coming, Resurrection of the Dead, Judgment, Heaven and Hell, and the Consummation of All Things, their meaning may be so diluted as to be almost meaningless on a popular level when placed against the fact that 25% of Catholics in the United States believe in reincarnation. What the figures might be for other first world Christians is a matter for guess work; they may be higher still.

Eschatological consciousness also shows weakness amongst many who have been exposed partially to the biblical idea of prophecy. However, their interpretation of revelation and prophetic utterance is largely made from a contemporary technological and media-driven perspective rather than anything biblical. Without proper theological formation in the Church, they will cite certain events like the turmoil in the middle-east, the widespread use of credit cards and computers, and the creation of the internet as signs that the coming of Jesus Christ is near. Simultaneously, this same person may also be infected with other superstitions. Subtly, and not so subtly, a substitute cosmology, and with it a corresponding anthropology, is being offered. With a vague awe, often inspired with the aid of the cinema, science and the media, there is a turning towards an impersonal, unchangeable cosmic monism, which teaches that all are but parts of one stupendous whole, whose body is nature, and God the soul. Consequently whatever 'is' only conforms to the cosmic laws of the universal 'all'.

The Church in the West is painfully aware of this religious-cultural situation and of its

consequences. Vatican II had affirmed that man is a question to himself and only God can give him the full and ultimate answer (cf. *GS* 21). John Paul II noted the connection between the constant growth of an ideology in the wealthy nations characterized by pride in technical advances and a certain immanentism that lead to the idolatry of material goods, the so-called consumerism. He declared the consequences to be ominous because

Immanentism is a reduction of the integral vision of the person, a reduction which leads not to true liberation but to a new idolatry, to the slavery of ideologies, to life in constraining and often oppressive structures of this world. (Address to the Roman Rota)

This was an echo of the concerns of the 1985 Synod of Bishops which endorsed Vatican II's affirmation of the legitimate autonomy of temporal realities in which a correctly understood secularization must be admitted, but went on to say that it was speaking of something totally different from the secularism that consists of an autonomist vision of man and the world, one which leaves aside the dimension of mystery, indeed neglects and denies it. Citing John Paul II's, *Redemptor Hominis*, the Italian commentator, Giovanni Manastra, completes the picture, declaring that:

Only a new culture, a culture that is religious in a profound sense, will be able to lift the veil of ignorance and of arrogance that, by altering the perception of the phenomenological world to the eyes of our secularized society, has generated a menacing ghost and destroyed our capacity to discern the true essence of creation.

Clearly there has been a growing and continuing undercurrent of *monism* in the modern

spiritual and philosophical climate for almost one hundred and fifty years, evidenced by increasing Western fascination with Hinduism (including Vedanta and Yoga) Taoism, Buddhism, Pantheism, Theosophy and Anthroposophy, Surat Shabda Yoga, Zen, and similar systems of thought, including the Occult, which explore the mystical and spiritual elements of a monistic philosophy, which in its pantheistic form identifies God with the universe and all that is in it. In short, 'All is One, One is All, All is God'. The implications for Christian eschatology are clear. For the last things to have any meaning at all, there needs must be a certain tension between God and creation, between the uncreated and created, between God and his human creature. Monism dissolves all these tensions and makes an eschatological view impossible. If reality is a unified whole and all existing things can be ascribed to, or described by, a single concept or system, the necessary tension between created and uncreated has been cut. The doctrine that mind and matter are reducible to the same ultimate substance or principle of being cannot admit the tension necessary for even the glimmer of anything like the Christian eschatological vision. Monism ignores all that is supernatural, the dualism of mind and matter, God and creation, and there can be no opposition between God and the world, as unity cannot be in opposition to itself. There can be no *eschaton* because,

'The divine mystery and greatness of the world has always been a temptation for mankind.' Mankind has perpetually abandoned God for idols, the cosmos for a profaned and secular world and the truth about mankind for its idolization. The constant temptation is to 'immanentism' a phenomenon which can assume surprising and 'unexpected forms, such as naturalism and magic, humanism and rationalism, nationalism and economism, state-worship and technology, in short every kind of idolatry'¹

However, the Christian myth of the *eschaton* is not necessarily dead. Indeed, it can appear in the most surprising contexts, possibly demonstrating a growing protest against



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the prevailing claustrophobic monism. From 1999, Hollywood launched a series of futuristic science fiction movies in a series known as 'The Matrix', a series which has achieved great popularity amongst the young. In fact, to understand all of its nuances one should probably be under twenty five. This film portrays a fantastic world in which the human race, besieged in a city named Jerusalem, faces annihilation from a hostile, alternative, demonic and robotic cyber world. Doubtless full of theological lacunae, understandably, since this is the work of movie directors and screen writers, not theologians, it nevertheless possesses a cosmological vision consonant with a Judeo-Christian view of the world and of mankind. Whatever their sins and weaknesses, the unique value of human beings emerges precisely as they are threatened with extinction from hostile forces erupting from within the cosmos, forces which have only an appearance of authentic personality. Consciously or unconsciously, it is a protest against a de-personalised cosmos and an assertion of the unique value of the human being, a protest against the evil infinity of a monistic universe.

However, before turning to the thought of Evgeny Lampert, the neglected and little known Russian theologian to whose ideas we will soon turn our attention, we should at least provide a sketch of the kind of monism and the consequences contained in what is generally known as the New Age movement. In the modern era which has lost its faith, in which dogmatic truth has been exchanged for religion as a subjective matter of taste, a situation predicted by John Henry Newman in the late 19th century, the intellectual attraction of an

uncompromising monistic theory of the universe exercises a particular attraction. Is it too severe to observe that the cryptic comment of the 14th century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* applies here, that ‘even hell has its mystics’?

Indeed, spiritualistic monism, when it is consistent with itself, will always lean to semi-pantheistic mysticism which exhibits only the most febrile and relative morality. As *Lifespring*, a New Age training seminar based on the monistic philosophy explains, ‘The Absolute within transcends all dualities, including good and evil.’ Swami Adbhutananda, a contemporary guru, declares that ‘good and evil have no absolute reality.’ He is supported by the best selling author, Deepak Chopra, in his *Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*. For Chopra, the idea that ‘all is one’ really undermines any philanthropy. If all is one flow, there are no givers or receivers. Nothing can ever be wrong since everything is equally part of the divine intelligence. The basis for morality has been dissolved. No one knows that better than Charles Manson, who asked, with a grotesque authority, ‘If God is One, what is bad?’ Meanwhile the new gnostics chatter on. Silva Mind Control, an influential spiritualistic self-help seminar declares that:

Everything is in some respect the universal mind and the creation of that mind... Each one of us is an idea in the universal mind. Man chooses to think of himself as a separate being... but actually we participate in this mind as an atom of water participates in the substance of the ocean.

Karl Barth was right to think that the immanentism he saw developing increasingly guarantees and completes the secular world picture. With radical immanentism not only does any necessary dualism disappear, but also all notions of difference, of alterity, of otherness are abolished, along with transcendence. ‘Atheism is lurking somewhere at the doors’ of modernity, declared Barth. Dualism enabled modernity to constitute a world as separate from the sovereignty of God as its creator. This way dualism is the root of secularism in modernity,

one of the most influential factors for the secularization of western culture. Cartesian dualism became the seed of atheism in the west, but like the lost souls in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, who flee continually from fire to ice, and from ice to fire, the continual flight is from the claustrophobia of immanent monism to the vertigo of radical dualism, each producing the other in a doomed cycle.

Evgeny Lampert published *The Divine Realm* in 1943, an extract from his doctoral thesis for the University of Oxford. Its subtitle is ‘Towards a theology of the Sacraments’. Its opening chapter, ‘Monism’, makes a clear connection with those concerns which had occupied the great Russian theologians and commentators of the modern era, particularly Fr Serge Bulgakov. Lampert wrote that:

Monism is always the denial of this transcendent-immanent mystery and dialectic of being, its dialogical character as two-in-one, *i.e.* what in Christian language is called *God-manhood*.²

Lampert acknowledges his debt to Russian sophiology and his connection to thinkers such as Nicholas Berdyaev, but he is no mere imitator. This is not a western style sacrament-by-sacrament manual of the 1940’s and we should also note that this was written in the midst of the Second World War, well predating the revival of Orthodox sacramental theology in the work of theologians such as Fr Alexander Schememann. Why it suffered such neglect is a mystery. Evgeny Lampert also had the gift of being able to recognize the pearls of truth embedded in quite erroneous and distorted systems, and of being able to harvest them for use in the construction of a new Orthodox way of seeing and of asking the fundamental question, is the world created by God, or has it its own independent, self-sufficient being? Concerning the doomed cycle of dualism and atheistic or cosmic monism he wrote,

There is no intellectual issue out of this dilemma. This can only be found by taking the whole question on to another level (μεταβασις εις αλλο γενοϋς) from the static to the dynamic, from the abstract to the concrete. The world is related to God not as His objectified equal, as a

form of being as its own co-ordinated with Him, but as His living self-revelation, as His 'other one' (qateron). It is *created* by God., it is God's creation. Its existence is a witness to the divine-human, theandric nature of divine being.³

His answer has profound implications for eschatology, which will hopefully become clear. The world is created out of the void; this means that it exists in God, and only in Him, and has no foundation of its own. It is hung over the abyss, and this abyss is 'nothingness.' He declares that, 'the knowledge of 'nothingness' is one of the deepest intuitions of the creature about its creaturehood'.⁴ This creates the tension necessary for a meaningful eschatology, as well as affirming the intimate connection between God and the world and mankind.

Lampert found that the ancient philosophical systems are inadequate for appreciating this vision of creation, whether they are those of Plato and Aristotle or their continuators.

They are unable to achieve a true (μεταβασις εις αλλο γενοϛ) in which the positive unity and correlation between God and the world, as well as their ontological distinction and 'otherness' are maintained. The idea is not that of cause or movement, but of creation and creaturehood. God is not the cause of the world but its *Creator*, and the world is God's *creation*. Philosophical and theological language does not usually even notice the immense and fundamental difference between these terms. On the contrary, it is maintained that creation is but a special form of causation. Yet there is such a difference as to be virtually a contradiction.⁵

There is no argument with his statement that 'we cannot penetrate into the depths of the life of God', nor with the statement that 'man is enabled to become aware of what is revealed by God himself about God's own reality'. But Lambert then takes his reader to the edge of the precipice saying that '*To this reality belongs the creation of the world*'. Suddenly we are over the edge. He declares that the Word of God, which sounds in the Heavens, sounds also in the universe,

What is $\alpha\nu\alpha$ is equally $\kappa\alpha\tau\omega$. The eternal image of man and of the world in man, the micro-

cosm and the macrocosm, abides in the very heart of the hidden, triune life of God, and his inner life is revealed in the eternal image of the world and man. Such is the mystery of eternal *God-manhood*, the divine-human, theandric mystery of being.⁶

Lambert takes us to a new understanding of the sacredness of creation and establishes the creation itself as the foundation for renewed sacramental understanding. We have not the time to give the details of his exposition, but much turns on the statement that 'Created life cannot be regarded as 'caused', as a thing made- a mere product of its maker. It is not a 'thing' at all, but precisely life'.⁷ Lampert rejects the idea of 'efficient cause' and the concept of God as 'producer'. These apply to things. If used of God and the world, God's relationship will be to extrinsic and extraneous objects. The world cannot be a sacrament of God, or a possible foundation for sacramental life, nor can man achieve an experience of God through the sacraments, if there is no living relationship between God and the other, his creation.⁸

When we say that the heavens proclaim the glory of God, this must not be understood in a trivial way as self-glorification or display on the part of God. The cosmos is not the theatre screen showing a movie of the divine. Rather, God 'releases, 'sets free' His divine life, His divine world from out of the depths of His transcendent hypostatic being into 'otherness' and self-existence'. Lambert dares to say that when we say that God creates the world '*ex nihilo*', it means 'out of Himself, out of His own divine eternal being.'⁹ Here he is entirely at one with Fr Pavel Florensky for whom the whole axis of creation and redemption turned upon the mystery of Golgotha, the self-offering of the God-man, Jesus. In Lampert's words,

Golgotha was fore-ordained at the creation of the world not merely as an event in time; it also constitutes the metaphysical foundation of creation. '*It is finished*', spoken by the God-man from the Cross on Golgotha embraces all being and is written across the face of the created universe....the Golgotha of God is the mysteri-

ous ground of all creation...¹⁰

It becomes clear that God's divine existence has a twofold mode of revelation: in himself and in other being, which is to say in creation. 'The first exists in eternity, in a single integral act; the second is plunged in time, in becoming, in nothingness, which constitutes its self-existence'. Opposed to this is the claustrophobic philosophy of monism, 'which assumes the One is a self-enclosed and self-sufficient substance.... For this philosophy nothing is born to be, and the all-consuming Chronos eternally devours his children...'¹¹

Contrary to dualism or reductionist monism, Lampert argues for the spiritual quality of matter, something ever so dimly perceived by Marxist philosophy, but lost in its atheism. It is precisely because it is already spiritual, that matter, so often called dead or mere matter, can be the foundational element of a transcendent sacramental reality, which is to say, the vehicle and revelation of the Holy Spirit. This also allows other problematic areas of human existence to be understood in a new and transfigured way, areas such as economics, sex and art. We have space for a brief comment on the first two areas, economics and sex.

On the question of economics, and in terms which that will later emerge in John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*, Lampert revisits the work of N.F. Feodorov, whom he describes as that strange and most penetrating Russian thinker, and translates Feodorov in an eschatological light.¹² The economism which Feodorov opposed is seen as another form of deadly monism. Despite the faults in his system, Feodorov's work postulates man becoming aware of the transcendent power of his body in economic labour. He connects human economics with God's own creative action and Lampert concludes that 'even as economic master, man preserves the halo of Adam's royal glory'.¹³

On the question of the meaning and experience of sex, Lampert decries the tendency that appeared early in Christian writings to see sex as a kind of split in the creation, as an inevitable consequence of man's mixed nature

of flesh and spirit. This Neo-platonist and Gnostic view infiltrated the thought of some of the greatest Church Fathers and colluded with 'hatred of sex and of women, to cast out love from the world, portraying it as enticing lust, alluring falsehood, sweet poison or simply as 'paganism'.¹⁴ This infiltration has had disastrous consequences, because it:

...killed the great religious dream of the holiness of sex and of love, and of life as the feast of love. Sex was driven into the prison of bourgeois family existence and domesticity, where it was 'tolerated'; or else it was or is dragging on an irreligious life in night-clubs and similar institutions—a fatal counterpoise of marriage and the family conceived as mere matrimonial transactions. Sexual love found itself outside religion, unsanctified, abandoned to the whims of fate or...of the devil.¹⁵

In the face of this Lampert claims that the creation of woman is the very acknowledgement of the reality of sex as the fulfillment of creation; that sex is a transcendent reality, and that sexual life has a transcendent significance, while 'the union of the sexes in love is a witness to the fullness of being and life eternal.' It is a true tragedy that the holiness of sexual love has been so blasphemed: on the one hand by cold dualism, detesting the flesh as a source of defilement, and on the other, by an amoral monism which sees the flesh as the theatre of mere animal activity. Both are blind to 'the mystery and sacrament of holy flesh', as the 'way of ascent into the heavens and the grace of the Holy Spirit descending on it'.¹⁶

The coda to Lambert's *The Divine Realm* comes in four short sections entitled *The Symbol*, *The Sacramental Principle*, *Metabolism* and *Epiklesis*. In his conclusion, entitled *The Ultimacy of the Sacrament*, the sacraments are affirmed as essentially realized eschatological events.

In his treatment of the symbol, Lambert takes us to what is now familiar theological territory, but it was not so in 1943. He demonstrates that the symbol is a divine-human reality in which both God and his creature are operative and that far from being a mere semi-

otic convention, the meeting that occurs in a symbol is essentially a relationship of life, not of static contact, but 'living interpenetration and co-inherence.' The symbolic power of nature is the very foundation of the sacraments and without this power there is no sacrament. However, God's sacramental presence is inconceivable without it. But nature cannot create the sacrament. Rent asunder through sin, nature and the whole of creation, though created holy and theandric, await God's redemptive power in Christ. Again, for Lambert, as for Florensky, all turns on Golgotha and the empty tomb. Let Lambert say it for himself:

With the coming of the God-man and Saviour Jesus Christ, with his death on Golgotha there took place a shattering and mighty exorcism of the cosmos and Nature from within: 'Great Pan has died', the demonic possession of Nature is forthwith broken, the Prince of this world is driven out, and Nature awaits her final transformation in the eschatological fulfillment....Christ could not have fulfilled his cosmic exorcism, if Nature were not herself an ever-living witness to the Holy Spirit, whereby she cries in man and through man: 'Abba, Father!'¹⁷

In the section entitled *Metabolism* Lambert takes us past and beyond the philosophical constraints which have operated upon and largely distorted Christian sacramental understanding over the past millennium. The revival of the patristic concept of μεταβολη takes us past the blunt instruments of Aristotelian physics, past 'substance' and 'accidents' and crudely understood 'transubstantiation'. This ancient patristic concept is also more accessible to contemporary understanding before which the old scholastic language makes little or no sense. There is an unquestionable change that takes place in the sacraments, and not just in the elements of the eucharist alone. But to understand the orthodoxy of μεταβολη a sharp eschatological consciousness is essential.

Μεταβολη means that 'the elements of this world are translated from here to the world of the 'age to come', where God is all in all.' The elements of Nature are 'invisibly trans-

figured, and while remaining ontologically themselves, become truly Spirit-bearing and are deified'.¹⁸ This is but a taste of Lambert's treatment of the mystery of translation that occurs in the sacraments, a meeting and union of two worlds, of two distinct spheres of being. This approach still has the power today to startle Christian believers in their understanding of sacraments.

Immanent monism encloses human beings in a claustrophobic cosmos. Dualism, before it collapses upon itself in what Lambert calls 'the powerless convulsions of Prometheus', creates an unbridgeable gulf between earth and heaven, radically dividing God and the world. In 'Epiklesis', Lambert's penultimate section, the Holy Spirit of God is described as:

...that supreme Christian 'symbol', which breaks the fixed extrinsic limits and the estrangement of an objectivized world, and gives to the whole of sacramental life the quality of a dynamic all-pervading reality...to live in the Holy Spirit is to overcome the impenetrable barriers of unilluminated, hardened, lifeless existence.¹⁹

The Holy Spirit is the one who allows mankind once again to breathe the clear air of restored nature, of the world that is coming, and particularly in the sacraments. The sanctification of the world, its glorification and deification in Christ's redeeming sacrifice, is only real in the coming and action of the Holy Spirit. As it is in the world, so it is in the sacraments of the Church.

Lambert's conclusion reverberates upon a deep note, an apocalyptic diapason. Written in the midst of war he wonders whether 'beneath the thunder of war and world-catastrophes, unknown to many, there is taking place something more definite, decisive and essential for the world than the war itself and all the earthquakes overtaking European civilization'.²⁰ Whatever this something may be, it is taking place in the depth of creaturely existence, between God and man, between God and the world. It is at this point that he is most explicitly eschatological. The apocalypse of history, in which it must have seemed he was in-

deed standing, cannot annul eschatology, nor can eschatology annul history. Both are intimately related and cannot be divided. While the *Parousia* is the very limit-point of history, it also belongs to the apocalypse and to eschatology. History, while often tragic and brutal, is deeply meaningful. It is in history that 'God's creative and providential will is being realized, where God speaks to man, and man speaks to God.'²¹

Sacrament and *Eschaton* come together in his concluding reflection that:

...while sacraments and their power arise within the human and cosmic world of untransfigured nature, they transcend the limits of this age and reach out to the world to come. That ray of transfiguration, that light of Mount Tabor, is not extinguished, but shines

mysteriously in Christ's sacraments; and all creation seeks and longs for it. The sacrament, while it arises and is realized within this world, also reaches out to the beyond. It is a prophecy and anticipation, and thence the realization of God as 'all in all', in whom the whole cosmos is destined to become a sacrament, and man's creative, divine-human calling to be fulfilled.²²

Lampert concludes with a beautiful passage, written in the midst of the cataclysm of the Second World War, but its vision can be addressed to this and to any age of the world:

Into the midst of darkness gathering in a world weighed down by the burden of sin and suffering is borne a faint yet unmistakable whisper, a call to the wedding feast of the Apocalyptic Lamb. And the parched and cracked lips of all creation cry: 'Come Lord Jesus!'²³

NOTES

1 Evgeny Lampert, *The Divine Realm: Towards a theology of the Sacraments* (London: 1943, Faber and Faber Ltd) Foreward, p 5. Hereafter, *Divine Realm*.

2 *Divine Realm*, 12.

3 *Divine Realm*, 15.

4 *Ibid*.

5 *Divine Realm*, 44.

6 *Divine Realm*, 49.

7 *Divine Realm*, 50-51.

8 'The first sign of this divine charity must be sought in creation...the heavens, the earth, the waters, the sun, the moon and the stars... Even before discovering the God who reveals himself in the history of a people, there is a cosmic revelation, open to all, offered to the whole of humanity by the Creator... There is, therefore, a divine message secretly inscribed in creation,... a sign of the loving faithfulness of God who gives his creatures being and life, water and food, light and time...From created works one ascends ... to the greatness of God, to his loving mercy.' (Benedict XVI, *Commentary on Psalm 135 (136)*, 9 November 2005.)

9 *Divine Realm*, 51.

10 *Divine Realm*, 53.

11 *Divine Realm*, 61.

12 *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II, 14 September 1981. 'The word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that *man*, created in the image of God, *shares by his work in the activity of the Creator* and that, within the limits of

his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation. Cf. Gn. 2:2; Ex. 20:8, 11; Dt. 5:12-14.

'The faithful, therefore, must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation, and its orientation to the praise of God. Even by their secular activity they must assist one another to live holier lives. In this way the world will be permeated by the spirit of Christ and more effectively achieve its purpose in justice, charity and peace...Therefore, by their competence in secular fields and by their personal activity, elevated from within by the grace of Christ, let them work vigorously so that by human labor, technical skill and civil culture, created goods may be perfected according to the design of the Creator and the light of his word.' Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 36.

13 *Divine Realm*, 103.

14 *Divine Realm*, 93.

15 *Divine Realm*, 94.

16 *Divine Realm*, 97.

17 *Divine Realm*, 116.

18 *Divine Realm*, 125.

19 *Divine Realm*, 130-131.

20 *Divine Realm*, 137.

21 *Divine Realm*, 138.

22 *Divine Realm*, 139.

23 *Ibid*.