

# Spiritual Development of a Man

As ever, one can confront a lot of problems concerning spiritual development nowadays that implies growing into a Godlike self. It seems to me, one of the most actual problems of the topic under consideration for our contemporaries is the one of the definition (content) of the word “freedom”.

The word “freedom” is evidently the key word today used for propagandistic purposes. It seems to have quite a positive content, though actually it is a double-edged sword. What kind of freedom is meant here?

There may be different kinds of freedom. Let us dwell upon the main types.

*The first one* is its metaphysical<sup>[1]</sup> interpretation. We define it as one of the basic essential properties of human nature – the freedom of will which implies free choice of good or evil a person makes. Neither another man, nor the community, nor the laws, nor the authorities, nor demons, nor angels, nor God Himself can master or determine this kind of freedom. The classical maxim of the Fathers of Church is as follows: “God cannot save A MAN WITHOUT THE MAN HIMSELF.” It fully expresses the way Christians interpret the meaning of freedom of this kind.

Its *second* type is social. These are external kinds of freedom granted by community with its laws, traditions, religion, a set of values that determine the way a person should behave in community. This sphere is complicated, as lots of citizens that are granted civil rights are brought together.

And, finally, *the third* type of freedom is spiritual one. Unlike the two types mentioned above it means the man’s power over his own selfishness, evil inclinations (dispositions), indecent feelings and wishes, that is his power over himself. This kind of freedom can be secured only by the proper way of spiritual life. Any ordinary man<sup>[2]</sup>, is relatively free, but entire absolute freedom is secured by those few who managed to purify themselves from sins.

In the humanistic<sup>[3]</sup> world *the second* type of freedom is in the focus of attention. Its freedom of word, press, elections, social life, freedom of belief etc. The combination of all those freedoms granted to a citizen is taken as foundation (the basis) of the spiritual life of an individual and of his spiritual development.

But is it really true?

We can see MORE AND MORE CLEARLY what the policy of this kind, social life, legislation and the private life of an individual result in. What is going on in TODAY’S world? There seems to be freedom, but it is rather strange. Switch on the TV, surf the Internet, look through advertisement, magazines, newspapers – they all manifest freedom which makes one feel uneasy and scary. Freedom is not a trifling thing to dabble in.

Any right can be used by an individual for two opposite purposes. One can act either for the benefit of community (to keep the peace or to bring up men of virtue ) or for one’s own CORRUPT IMMORAL reasons (to propagate defamation<sup>[4]</sup>, violence or lechery etc.) As a result, we face moral degradation to a great degree in those “free” countries, where ONE CAN HARDLY EXPECT TO EXPERIENCE WHAT WE DEFINE IN ORTHODOX CHURCH AS SPIRITUALITY.

Such freedom being of basic value TURNS OUT to be poisonous for an individual. It causes the most negative consequences leading to the EMPTINESS and moral CORRUPTION both of an individual and the community, to the anarchism of ideas, perversion of culture, materialism, etc.

This is the way an American psychologist characterized the independent television in his country: “When you switch on the TV you automatically switch off a process of self-development.” Unfortunately

it is the same in Russia today. American statistics show that by the age of 18 a person has witnessed 150 thousand scenes of violence of which 25 thousand are murders. If so, what kind of spiritual development can we speak about? It is actually the freedom of developing the most evil demonic instincts in an individual.

The substitution of the idea of spiritual freedom that implies that an individual is not driven or motivated by any evil from inside by the idea of the freedom of passions and their priority in the modern culture is the impending threat for humanity.

What did the story of humanity begin with? Everyone who has ever read the Bible remembers how a man got freedom for the first time when he rebelled against God as the supreme law of existence. What were the consequences of it for humanity? It caused murder and, later on, much violence, manslaughter, suffering up to now. History is supposed to teach people. Cicero used to say: "History is our best teacher." But far from it, there are no changes for the better to be seen. The guiding principle in the modern civilized world today is "freedom for the sake of freedom." It causes the worst obsession and poisons the minds of more and more people, for "freedom" itself does not motivate an individual to become more moral or spiritual. And it will go the same way UNLESS HUMANITY COMES TO ITS SENSES. AND THE END OF ITS HISTORY IS EVIDENT. IT WILL DESTROY ITSELF.

It gives evidence to the fact that external kinds of freedom without restrictions<sup>[5]</sup> that Christ imposes on people do not dignify a person. Moreover, they are the means of his moral decay and humiliation.

Indeed, if SUCH kind of freedom is the main priority it leads to THE SPIRITUAL FREEDOM OF AN INDIVIDUAL BEING ELIMINATED AND TO SLAVERY BEING ENFORCED. This is where the Godlike man stops being and the beast of a man appears for whom a man ceases to be of prior value.

This consideration helps to determine the unambiguous conception of Christians concerning external kinds of freedom that claims that external freedom can give aid to one's considering oneself to be A HUMAN BEING who faces THE CHOICE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL. External freedom can also encourage one to figure out WHAT GIVES PURPOSE AND MEANING TO ONE'S LIFE, as well as to realize that IT MAKES NO POINT LIVING IF YOU DO NOT BELIEVE IN GOD AND ETERNAL LIFE. For this reason the most important challenge for community is to provide a lawful environment and a set of values in which external freedom would help an individual become a morally improved better self instead of urging his moral decay.

What is essential for it according to the Christian conception?

It is worth mentioning the fact that Lord Jesus Christ and His disciples did not ever resent the oppressive regime of the totalitarian state where they lived. There were slaves in the Roman empire. What was the position of a slave like? He was often treated like an animal. Strange as it might seem, neither Jesus Who said "I am the truth"<sup>[6]</sup>, nor the apostles were indignant at the violation of human rights. Moreover, they encouraged to conform to rules, obey their masters and to be loyal to them in the eyes of God. By the way, for this reason Christ and Christianity are and will be severely criticized for by non-Christians as well as THOSE of the Christians AFFECTED by the perverse ideas of *social freedom, equality, brotherhood*.

Indeed, neither the Son of God nor His disciples fought against the cruelty and injustice of the existing mode of life and its laws. They focused on different issues: "Look into your inner self. You cannot help being envious, greedy, vain, proud, telling lies, feeling hatred, can you? If so, none of the EXTERNAL freedoms will grant your well-being and happiness either here on earth or in eternal life till you remain the same." FOR, bring the worst evil, these are the passions that cause spiritual and THEN

social slavery and corrupt any well-meaning intention for their own purpose. When Christ teaches, “Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin,”<sup>[7]</sup> He clearly points out the root of all slavery and gives key to TRUE freedom?

**IT IS IN THE ENSLAVEMENT OF SPIRIT THAT ORTHODOXY** finds the root of evil in its various manifestations in our life. IT teaches that only freedom of spirit can do good to a human being. This spiritual improvement of man can be acquired through his own battle against his *ego*. This FREEDOM FROM SIN cannot be granted by any authority. It is a value obtainable from within. For no one can cure one of greed or envy. What kind of freedom can benefit mankind?

The key concept in the orthodox doctrine is love which is apprehensive of doing any moral, mental, physical harm to anyone or anything: to an individual, community, state, nature... It appears to be the best guard to real freedom. One of the greatest thinkers of the ancient world – Paul the apostle – wrote “For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another”<sup>[8]</sup>. The venerable Varsonophi the Great (the fourth century) said that freedom is good when combined with the fear of God.

Man is enslaved by passions and, being proud, does not admit it. So the ever actual problem is how to release from the enslavement of spirit, overlooking the enslavement of body. External freedom does not initiate, nor does it give the necessary aid to spiritual life. Without getting purified from passions man can be abetted to self-destruction. But where is THE PROPER CURE to be found? They are still to be obtained in orthodox faith. IT provides man with the guidance of how to acquire true freedom, IT also SUPPLIES an individual with the essential set of values.

**WHAT ARE THESE VALUES? ONE OF THEM – THE PROPER INTERPRETATION OF THE NOTION “FREEDOM” HAS ALREADY BEEN DWELT UPON. THESE ARE SOME MORE OF THEM.**

**THE SECOND ONE** presents an answer to the most important question “What do I live for?” THE ANSWER HAS BEEN VERIFIED BY MULTITUDE OF PEOPLE. The gist of it is given by Dostoevski: “Only he who believes in eternal life can perceive what he is meant for.” He did not doubt that without the belief that the soul exists and that it exists forever it is unnatural and unbearable to be a human being. What can a more solid keystone be found?

**THE THIRD** value presents an objective conclusion about the state anyone finds himself in: man is infected by PASSIONS and is constantly suffering from them. Nevertheless man neglects the fact though one cannot cure a disease if one does not realize that he suffers from it. So the first valid thing to do, as Orthodox Church teaches, is to admit that you have spiritual diseases or passions that corrupt your soul in order to begin to cure them. Orthodox teaching attaches great importance to it, as spiritual growth cannot be achieved without it.

**THE FOURTH ONE** shows a real way and real means of curing a person of passions. Orthodox Church has a SCIENCE THAT STUDIES THIS SPHERE OF THE LIFE OF SPIRIT AND HAS BEEN PRACTICALLY VALIDATED. THIS SCIENCE IS CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM based on the Gospel COMMANDMENTS and also ON TAUCHINGS OF THE FATHERS OF CHURCH, WHO REVEALED IN DETAIL THE DEPTHS OF SPIRITUALITY. What are the commandments? They are not a kind of BURDON GOD IMPOSED on people, they are a set of proper qualities for normal people. The decision to live according to these norms and to repent if you break them is an effective means of getting cured of sinful ailments, as Orthodox teaching has claimed for more than 2000 years. Church sacraments are of great help here. THE MAIN HINDRANCE in applying this therapy is the human pride or ego, as CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM TEACHES. So Dostoevski exclaimed: “Be humble, you proud man!”

**THE FIFTH VALUE** claims that the supreme quality and merit of a person does not have to do with either his talents and knowledge, or his labour and achievements, or his wisdom, justice and his being manly. It has to do with another thing without which all his merits are worth nothing. This supreme feature of a human being reveals itself in love for another person, any person regardless of his belief, race, social position, etc.

Paul the Apostle described this Christian value in the following REMARKABLE words considered the best description and definition of love: “ (1) *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. (2) And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but I have not love, I am nothing. (3) And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing*»<sup>[9]</sup>.

This is what Orthodox Church encourages man to do. Making this truth the guiding principle and the main idea of upbringing could radically change life IN ALL ITS SPHERES, REVEAL THE TRUE FREEDOM, FOR FREEDOM WITHOUT LOVE IS DECEPTION WHICH DOES NOT ONLY CAUSE INNUMERABLE SUFFERINGS TO A PERSON BUT ALSO TURNS HIM INTO A DUMMY OF PRIMITIVE INSTINCTS POSSESSED BY DEMONIC POWERS.

But how to acquire love, if one does not have it?

IT IS OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE THAT ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY DOES NOT MEAN LOVE, NATURAL FOR ALL LIVING BEINGS. IT MEANS LOVE IN GOD, WHICH IS DIFFERENT ON PRINCIPLE FROM LOVE BY NATURE IN ITS CHARACTER AND MANIFESTATION. LOVE IN GOD IS SUPERIOR TO LOVE BY NATURE, BUT IT DOES NOT HAPPEN ALL OF A SUDDEN (AS IT HAPPENS WHEN ONE HAS FALLEN IN LOVE), BUT IT **IS ACQUIRED** by a Christian being at war with his own selfishness, passions, forcing himself to live by Gospel commandments, not simply by the commandments of The Old Testament or by humane moral requirements, which concern only the most evident sins, such as “Do not kill. Do not steal. Etc.”

Jesus Christ appeals to people for curing their souls, not tongues, or legs, or arms...He invokes people not to think badly of anybody, to mean well, to beware of any vicious habits and thoughts. The life of spirit begins within a person’s soul. This is in where the battle begins. Dostoevski explained it in the following way: “Devil is at war with God. And the battlefield is the hearts of people.” These are exactly the words to express the gist of it all. Spiritual development of man is inside of him, it is hidden from anyone, it is possible only with repentance, praying to God “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

THE CHURCH HAS GIVEN US THIS REMARKABLE PRAYER FOR EVERYONE TO ASK GOD FOR MERCY ANY TIME OF THE DAY, IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCES OF LIFE, WHATEVER ONE MAY DO.

The Russian poet Lermontov wrote about this prayer the following wonderful verses:

*In a trying minute of life  
If sadness o'erfills the heart,  
One miraculous invocation  
By rote, without cease I recite.*

*There is a beneficent will  
In the music of living words,  
And there breathes in them*

*An unknown, sacred delight.*

*And the soul will release its burden,  
Doubt is far away,  
And it's easy to trust, and to cry,  
And I feel so light, so light...*

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[1] Metaphysical – intrinsic, original, essential.

[2] see John 8, 34.

[3] Humanistic – non-religious, devoid of its faith in God, having only practical interest in mind.

[4] Defamation – facts being published (either true or false) that mar the reputation of an individual, organization, idea, etc.

[5] see. 2 Thess 2, 7.

[6] see. John 14, 6.

[7] John 8, 34.

[8] Galatians 5, 13.

[9] 1 Corinthians 13, 1–3.