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The Role of Christian Orthodox Patriotism of Athos in the Formation of Spiritual and Moral Values

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Abstract

Introduction. Currently, traditional scientific approaches to understanding patriotism are insufficient and need to be supplemented. There is a need to develop new approaches and methods for constructing patriotic attitudes. An example of Orthodox patriotic Christian attitudes is the experience of Athos monasticism. The purpose of the study is to identify the role and significance of Athos Orthodox patriotism in the formation of spiritual and moral values.

Materials and Methods. The hermeneutic method of analyzing religious texts and interpreting the Old and New Testaments, theological literary and philosophical texts is used. The methodology is based on cognitive, specifically historical and semiotic approaches to the analysis of Orthodox Christian patriotism. In the context of the study, the cognitive approach consists in the individual perception of the communicative flows of Orthodox values of Athos through the Black Sea region to Russian lands, in which the patriotic worldview is being formed. As arguments, correspondence of confessors and materials of letters from Athos are given.

Results. The spiritual origins of the patriotism concept are analyzed. The role of the monastic tradition that developed on the Holy Mountain in shaping the idea of Christian patriotism that existed in the Eastern Roman Empire is described. Foreign and domestic political reasons for the transformation of patriotism in Byzantium towards the separation of the religious component from it are revealed. A historical review of the ideas of Christian patriotism in Russian Orthodoxy from the Baptism of Russia to the present is carried out on the material of monuments of literature and creations of the Holy Fathers.

Discussion and Conclusion. The Baptism of Russia, its Christianization, with the important role of Athos monasticism, transformed patriotism in Russian identity and mentality into a phenomenon not of social or political order, but a spiritual phenomenon that strengthens faith in God and neighbor, and their Fatherland. It was concluded that the experience of Athos monasticism can be considered as the basis of the great unity of Russia and other Orthodox countries, overcoming hostility, alienation and hatred inflicted on people by destructive influences.

Keywords: patriotism, spiritual and moral values, Christianity, Russian Orthodoxy, Athos, modernity

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Роль христианского православного патриотизма Афона в формировании духовно-нравственных ценностей

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Аннотация

Введение. В настоящее время традиционные научные подходы к пониманию патриотизма оказываются недостаточными и нуждаются в дополнении. Возникает необходимость выработки новых подходов и способов конструирования патриотических установок. Примером православных патриотических христианских установок может служить опыт Афонского монашества. Целью исследования является выявление роли и значения православного патриотизма Афона в формировании духовно-нравственных ценностей.

Материалы и методы. Применяется герменевтический метод анализа религиозных текстов и толкования Ветхого и Нового завета, теологических литературных и философских текстов. Методология основывается на когнитивном, конкретно историческом и семиотическом подходах к анализу православного христианского патриотизма. В контексте исследования когнитивный подход состоит в индивидуальном восприятии коммуникативных потоков православных ценностей Афона через Причерноморье на русские земли, в котором происходит формирование патриотического мировоззрения. В качестве аргументов приводится переписка духовников и материалы писем с Афона.

Результаты исследования. Проанализированы духовные истоки понятия патриотизма. Описана роль монашеской традиции, сложившейся на Святой Горе Афон, в формировании идеи христианского патриотизма, бытовавшего в Восточной Римской империи. Раскрываются внешне- и внутривосточные причины трансформации патриотизма в Византии в сторону отделения от него религиозного компонента. На материале памятников литературы и творений святых отцов осуществляется исторический обзор идей христианского патриотизма в русском православии – от Крещения Руси до современности.

Обсуждение и заключение. Крещение Руси, ее христианизация, при важной роли Афонского монашества, преобразила в русском самосознании и менталитете патриотизм в явление не социального или политического порядка, а в явление духовное, укрепляющее веру к Богу и ближнему, и своему Отечеству. Сделан вывод, что опыт Афонского монашества может рассматриваться как основание великого единения России и других православных стран, преодоление вражды, отчуждения и ненависти, нанесенных людям деструктивными влияниями.

Ключевые слова: патриотизм, духовно-нравственные ценности, христианство, русское православие, Афон, современность

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Introduction. Currently, according to the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of November 9, 2022 No. 809 “On the approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values”, Russian state policy is officially focused on countering the “system of ideas and values alien to the Russian people and destructive for the Russian society”, which are cultivated by the West. This is primarily selfishness, individualism, cosmopolitanism, immorality and destructive sexual relations. Modern society is covered by the risks of a networked global world, which are a consequence of the mental “occupation” of the consciousness of young people, and are aimed at changing the system of values of individual and mass consciousness, the destruction of non-Western cultures based on traditional civilizational values.

According to V.V. Putin patriotism provides for a sense of deep respect “for their history and traditions, the spiritual values of our peoples, our thousand-year culture and the unique experience of the coexistence of hundreds of peoples and

languages in Russia. This is responsibility for our country and its future”¹ [1]. Currently, traditional scientific approaches to understanding patriotism, the formation of patriotic values of young people are insufficient and need to be supplemented. There is a need to develop new approaches and methods for constructing patriotic attitudes [1, p. 170–171]. Orthodox Christianity is an inseparable part of the Russian spiritual heritage. Its role in the formation of traditions of patriotism among young people is great. The example of the construction of Orthodox patriotic Christian attitudes is the experience of Athos monasticism. The purpose of the study is to identify the role and significance of Athos Orthodox patriotism in the formation of spiritual and moral values in modern society.

Materials and Methods. As part of an appeal to the spiritual heritage of previous generations of ascetics of piety, Orthodox literature has developed a tradition of publishing letters from church leaders and elders addressed to the monastery brethren, relatives and friends, and spiritual children. In this work, we turned to the correspondence of the merchant of Novouzensk district Pavel Ivanovich Pomeltsov with the inhabitants of the Russian Holy Panteleimon Monastery on Holy Mount Athos, the Greek rector Archimandrite Gerasim and the Russian confessor Hieroskhimonakh Jerome (Solomentsov), and other letters [2, 3].

The hermeneutic method of interpreting texts and meanings, which was originally developed for the analysis of religious texts and used in the interpretation of the Old and New Testaments, and later for literary and philosophical texts, is used in the study. The method is based on an explication of the principles of understanding and explaining the content in which the text was created. The research methodology is based on cognitive, specifically historical, semiotic approaches to the analysis of Orthodox Christian patriotism. In the context of the study, the cognitive approach consists in the individual perception of the communicative flows of Orthodox values of Mount Athos through the Black Sea region to the Russian lands, in which a patriotic worldview is being formed.

Results. The roads of the Black Sea region were a link from Byzantium to the Russian lands. Through them there was a spiritual communication of Orthodoxy to the Russian princes. In the 10th century there was an intensive exchange of cultural and religious ideas between the peoples of the region. An important event was the adoption of Christianity in Kievan Rus in 988 by Prince Vladimir, which led to the strengthening of ties with Byzantium. Byzantine culture had a significant impact on the development of art, architecture and writing in the region. Since the Baptism of Russia, Russian Orthodoxy has been greatly influenced by the Holy Mount Athos. The contacts of our Church with Athos monasteries began in ancient times. Reverend Anthony founded the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, which became the “mother of Russian monasteries”, being inspired precisely by Athos traditions. Lavra became the “cradle” of monasticism in Russia, and, as you know, it was the monasteries that served not only as religious, but also as cultural and educational centers at that time.

Today their activities can be considered as an example of a spiritual and moral tradition. In Russia, issues of morality and spirituality have always been central to the upbringing of the younger generation. In the Russian Empire, the Orthodox Church has always been the basis of the moral education of young people. Unlike Western American values, which educate young people in individualism, the desire for leadership at all costs, success, mainly of a material nature as a measure of personal achievements, Orthodoxy formed value guidelines for the priority of the spirit over matter, spiritual over material.

In modern Russia, there is a tendency in spiritual life to move from a society of consumption to a society of creation, where the ideal is the duty of ministry, the individual’s development as a condition for the development of the community as a whole. So far, this process is being created only in the minds of strong personalities. Traditional for the upbringing of the younger generation in Russia were such Orthodox values as love for God, faith, keeping the commandments, humility, sacrificial ministry. For young people, it is important to form a moral consciousness, which is based on conscience, shame, responsibility. The moral standards contained in the Old and New Testament contribute to spiritual improvement and personal development. S.N. Bulgakov said that religion is the main and guiding force in human spiritual life. It carries the highest values that are an ideal for life, which regulates the behavior of people [4]. Thus, the Orthodox faith should be the basis of value orientation in the process of educating the younger generation. N.O. Lossky believed [5] that a person deprived of the moral values of Orthodoxy lives in a small world composed of fragments of the universe, they are doomed to make a lot of mistakes.

Since ancient times the history of Athos has been associated with the army and important political figures who influenced the fate of peoples. Reverend Peter of Athos, one of the first ascetics through whom the mother of God informed the whole Christian world about the Holy Mountain, is a commander who later founded a new spiritual army. The outstanding Byzantine emperor and commander Nicephorus Phocas, the patron saint of Athanasius of Athos, also

¹ Meeting of V.V. Putin with representatives of the public on patriotic education of youth. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/16470> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

stroved for monastic life, creating the Great Lavra at his own expense. He invited the reverend to him at crucial moments before the battles.

Athos was part of the Eastern Roman Empire at the time of the birth of monastic life there. Byzantium was based on the idea of a Christian empire, a homeland for all Christians. Emperors relied on the support of believers to strengthen the unity of the country and resist paganism, and the holy fathers, in turn, also participated in the formation of Byzantine patriotism. For example, the importance of love for the fatherland was emphasized by Vasily the Great. St. Gregory the Theologian also linked the good of society with the personal actions of everyone: "Honoring your mother is a sacred thing, but everyone has their own mother, and everyone's common mother is their homeland" [6, p. 361].

However, for all the significance of patriotism in the context of Byzantine history, its patriotic paradigm was highly dependent on the internal political situation in the empire and on the presence of external threats. From the era of Emperor Justinian I to the reign of Basil II Porphyrogenitus, that is from the 6th to the 11th centuries, in the political discourse of Byzantium, the idea of patriotism, which at first gave way to loyalty to the emperor, was gradually revived, for example, in connection with religious-Arab expansion (7th century) or internal strife due to iconoclasm (8th century). Thus, there was a return to the ancient Roman understanding of patriotism as love for the homeland and the willingness to sacrifice life for it. In the middle of the 10th century, patriotism was identified with religious devotion and perceived as the fruit of God's providence about Byzantium as the common homeland of the Romans. Subsequently, for example, in wars with Orthodox Bulgarians, this feeling was deprived of a religious component. Patriotism lost its religious meaning in the 13th – 14th centuries in the fight against Western and Asian invaders. Only Athos resisted the ideas of union with the Roman Catholic Church. Athos monks with their blood confirmed their commitment and loyalty to Orthodoxy.

It was a challenging time for Athos. A tragic moment in its history is the destructive raids of the Catalans at the beginning of the 14th century: "It was scary to see", wrote the student of the Hilandar abbot Daniel in «Genealogy», the desolation of the Holy Mountain, perpetrated by nasty godless peoples... the Catalans... they burnt a lot of holy temples, plundered all the wealth and took the prisoners into slavery, and those who remained died of starvation, and since there was no one burying them, the beasts of the earth and the birds of heaven ate their bodies" [7, p. 24]. Note that it was in these difficult times on Mount Athos that the practice of hesychasm flourished, noetic prayer, which became the fundamental element of Orthodox monasticism and spiritual practice in the East and in Russia. Hesychasm was aimed at the transformation and deification of human nature. Therefore, for Athos monks, patriotism has always been predominantly a spiritual feeling.

Before the fall of the Empire, questions of patriotism as a defense of a dying homeland were of acute concern to Orthodox Romans. Saint Simeon of Solunsky, (+1429) a supporter of Athos hesychasm, united the defense of faith and Fatherland in a single circle of Christian virtues, arguing that the defense of faith is the path to salvation, and the defense of the Fatherland is jealousy by piety. He illustrated his thoughts on the example of Thessaloniki, believing that the defense of this city, which was a stronghold of Orthodoxy, is a sacred cause [8]. Unfortunately, in 1430 Thessaloniki was captured by the Turks, the Athos monks obeyed Sultan Murad II. However, God's plan is visible in this. Athos, having become politically independent from the emperor, did not participate in secular attempts to save the empire through spiritual subjugation to the Latin West, reacted negatively to the church union concluded at the Ferraro-Florentine Council (1438–1445).

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the conquest of the Orthodox kingdom by the Turkish Sultan, the ideas of patriotism were excluded from the official church discourse. Athos was in a privileged position until the middle of the 16th century. The sultans had been retaining its former rights for 130 years, until 1566, when Sultan Selim II issued a firman that took away their estates from the Athos monasteries. However, even before that, a high poll tax (haraj) had been imposed on the inhabitants of the Holy Mountain. In the 18th century monastic life on the Holy Mountain went into decay, which was associated with the Russian-Turkish wars and the deterioration of the attitude of the Turkish authorities towards Orthodox monasticism, especially Slavic. The attitude towards Athos monks in Russia had also changed. The Russian government, both spiritual and secular, considered immigrants from Russia who retired to the Holy Mountain for the sake of feats of piety, as self-willed and deserters, and allowed return entry to Russia only in the rank in which they left it.

Nevertheless, Russia has always supported the liberation struggle of the Greeks, which continued in the 19th – early 20th centuries. However, France and England intervened in it, fearing an increase in Russian influence in Southeast Europe. The uprising against the Turks in 1821, organized by Alexander Ypsilantis, was crushed. The military occupation of Athos, that began after it, was stopped only thanks to the Adrianople Treaty between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1829, according to which, in particular, the monastery estates were returned. However, the ideology of Byzantium, based on Christian patriotism, dissolved into Greek nationalism, which grew on feelings of resentment for the humiliated position in

front of the Ottomans. The “grains” of high Christian patriotism, affirmed on a spiritual basis, “sprouted” on Russian soil thanks to ties with Athos, which, as it can be seen from the historical review presented above, always tried to maintain its political and church independence.

Since Christianization, Russia, deepening borrowings and cultural ties with Byzantium, simultaneously formed its identity, and just like in Eastern Christian civilization, patriotic feelings for the Motherland became its basis. Gradually, Christian patriotism is becoming an important part of the Russian mentality and the basis of Russian statehood.

The idea of the unity of the Holy Land of Russia in the fight against Gentiles sounds in “Primary Chronicle” by St. Nestor (12th century). The state encourages religious unity, and the church, in turn, supports love for the homeland. A positive assessment of patriotism is also found in Pechersk Paterik. The church has truly become a “school” of patriotism. The first Russian Metropolitan Hilarion of Kyiv in “Sermon on Law and Grace” emphasizes the equality of peoples before God and the national dignity of the Russian land.

A classic example of how the Russian Church strengthened the patriotic spirit of the people through prayers and instructions is the spiritual support provided by St. Sergius to Prince Dmitry Donskoy in the fight against the Tatar Khan Mamai. Predicting the prince’s victory, the monk urged him not only to be resistant to material losses, but also to be ready to give his life for Orthodoxy. At the same time, few people remember that Sergius of Radonezh received the blessing to create a communal monastery from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Afonite Filofei Kokkin. Deacon Zosima from the Trinity-Sergius Monastery had compiled a short but important description of the Holy Mount Athos by the end of the 14th century, emphasizing its spiritual significance and influence on Orthodox monasticism [9].

In the Middle Ages of the Russian history, the defense of the homeland was equated with the defense of faith and perceived as an obligation. Reverend Joseph Volotsky argued that in the event of a threat from infidels and heretics, it is necessary not only to condemn them, but also to injure them, thereby sanctifying their hand. He referred to St. Chrysostom, who called for protecting the faith even physically, emphasizing the importance of actively defending Orthodoxy [10]. After the fall of Byzantium, the patriotic idea “Moscow – Third Rome” (1527–1528) was born in Russia. Its author is the elder of the Pskov Eleazarov monastery Filofei. In his message to the Pskov grand-ducal governor, clerk Misyur Munekhin, the elder argued that God chose Moscow as the sole stronghold of the truly Christian world after world rule passed from Rome to Constantinople, and then to Moscow, when the Greeks fell away from Orthodoxy [11].

This theory contributed to the formation of the perception of Russia as a Katechon – a state with a religious and civilizational mission in preserving spiritual and moral values and saving the world from “global evil”, described in church tradition as “the secret of lawlessness”. Athos, preserved as another pillar of Orthodoxy throughout the world, was also involuntarily involved in the eschatological context of the last kingdom.

In the 19th century in Russia, the doctrine of spiritual foundations of patriotism developed. Patriotism as the spiritual virtue of a pious Christian was defined by Metropolitan Filaret (1782–1867). Noting the importance of love for enemies, he emphasized the need to confront the enemies of the Fatherland and disdain the enemies of faith. Reverend Anthony Optinsky (1795–1865) called for active patriotism as a readiness “to sacrifice their own salvation for the salvation of the fatherland” [12]. Citing the historical exploits of his ancestors in the times of 1612 and 1812, he pointed out the need to discard cowardice and betray themselves to the will of God. The obedience of state power and the holy church, which inspired the soldiers not to spare their lives for the holy Orthodox faith and Fatherland, was defended by the Monk Ambrose of Optina (1812–1891).

Saint Ignatius (Bryanchaninov) (1807–1867) equated the feat of soldiers who suffered for the Fatherland with martyrdom for Christ. He said that they, “sacrificing their life to the Fatherland, sacrifice it to God” [13]. The idea of the inseparability of the life of a Christian and their spiritual practices from patriotism can be traced in the Hesychast collection “Philokalia” translated by St. Theophanes the Recluse (1815–1894). The holy righteous John of Kronstadt (1829–1909) taught that patriotism is risen by the faith of Christ and urged Christians to remember that “the earthly Fatherland with its Church is the threshold of the heavenly Fatherland” [14]. Considering patriotism as a spiritual phenomenon, the holy fathers often tried to explain the defeat of the Russian army not by political and social reasons, but by apostasy. Thus, for example, St. Nicholas of Japan (1836–1912) said about the failures of the Russian army in the Russo-Japanese War: “God punishes Russia, because it turned away from Him. Without God, without morality, without patriotism, the people cannot exist independently” [15].

Discussion and Conclusion. Thus, we see that the Baptism of Russia, its Christianization, with the important role of Athos monasticism, transformed patriotism in Russian identity and mentality into a phenomenon not of social or political order, but a spiritual phenomenon that strengthens faith and serves as one of the facets of expressing love for God and neighbor [16, 17]. Today Russia is not deaf to the teachings of the holy fathers. Having gone through severe trials during its historical path, including the period of God-fighting, the country is reborn on the basis of a clear distinction between

good and evil. We would like to believe that the importance of the religious component in modern patriotism will increase as it was in the Athos tradition, learned by Orthodoxy. The experience of Athos monasticism will be the key to the great unity of Russia and other Orthodox countries. It will teach the world a spiritual lesson in overcoming hostility.

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