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Original Theoretical Research



The Problem of the Decline of Spirituality: in the Works of Russian Religious Philosophers

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Abstract

Introduction. The subject of this study is the notion, which took shape in Russian religious philosophy of the 19th–21st centuries, of the decline of spirituality as a “spiritual illness” of society. In conducting this research, the authors draw not only on the works of Russian thinkers of the past but also analyze the writings of contemporary religious thinkers: P.P. Kalinovsky, V.A. Elfimov, and others. Several research objectives are addressed, including: identifying, in the works of Russian philosophers of the 19th–21st centuries, the causes of the decline of spirituality in society; analyzing the possible consequences of this “spiritual illness”; and describing initiatives aimed at the spiritual revitalization of society.

Materials and Methods. The descriptive, historical, and comparative methods are employed as research methods. To demonstrate a positive view of the role and significance of illness in Christian doctrine, the authors analyze and synthesize references to attitudes toward this phenomenon found in the writings of Russian religious philosophers, utilizing the dialectical method.

Results. Drawing on the works of Russian religious thinkers who regarded the decline of spirituality as a “spiritual illness” of society, the authors identify the following as the main causes of this decline: the secularization of culture, weak willpower, susceptibility to vices, and the indifference of the majority of society toward the immoral behavior of its individual members. The authors list the possible consequences of the decline in spirituality, including the loss of the meaning of life, creative energy, and vitality. They cite concepts of the spiritual revitalization of society developed by Russian thinkers such as V.S. Solovyov, S.L. Frank, V.A. Yelfimov, and P.P. Kalinovsky.

Discussion and Conclusion. In addition to the domestic philosophical heritage, the authors cite Western concepts by S. Freud, E. Fromm, K. Jaspers, and M. Unamuno, which view the “decline of spirituality” as a kind of “spiritual illness” of society. The authors conclude that there are differences between foreign and Russian thinkers in their explanations of the causes of this phenomenon. As a result of this scholarly inquiry, practical advice is offered on the spiritual healing of society, the essence of which lies in a return to religious faith and the observance of such fundamental principles of secular ethics as humanism and the rejection of selfishness.

Keywords: spiritual decline, illness, indifference, secularization, faith, health

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Original Theoretical Research

Проблема упадка духовности: на материале работ русских религиозных философов

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Аннотация

Введение. Предметом изучения является сформировавшееся в русской религиозной философии XIX–XXI вв. представление об упадке духовности как «духовной болезни» общества. При проведении исследования авторы

обращаются не только к работам отечественных мыслителей прошлого, но и анализируют труды современных религиозных мыслителей – П.П. Калиновского и В.А. Елфимова и др. Решается несколько исследовательских задач, среди которых: поиск в трудах отечественных философов XIX–XXI столетий причин возникновения упадка духовности в обществе; анализ возможных последствий данной «духовной болезни»; а также описание проектов по духовному оздоровлению общества.

Материалы и методы. В качестве методов научного исследования применяются описательный, исторический и сравнительный методы. Для демонстрации положительного взгляда на роль и значение болезни в христианском вероучении авторы анализируют и синтезируют содержащиеся в текстах русских религиозных философов указания на отношение к данному феномену, используется диалектический метод.

Результаты исследования. Опираясь на работы русских религиозных мыслителей, считавших упадок духовности «духовной болезнью» общества, авторы определяют в качестве основных причин его наступления процессы секуляризации культуры, слабую силу воли, подверженность порокам, а также безразличие большей части общества к аморальному поведению его отдельных членов. Перечисляются возможные последствия упадка духовности, среди которых – потеря смысла жизни, творческой энергии и сил. Приводятся разработанные в отечественной мысли концепции духовного оздоровления общества В.С. Соловьева, С.Л. Франка, В.А. Елфимова, П.П. Калиновского.

Обсуждение и заключение. Помимо отечественного философского наследия авторами приводятся западные концепции З. Фрейда, Э. Фромма, К. Ясперса, М. Унамуно, рассматривающие «упадок духовности» как своеобразную «духовную болезнь» общества. Делается вывод о различиях в объяснении причин возникновения данного феномена между зарубежными и отечественными мыслителями. В результате научного поиска даются практические советы по духовному оздоровлению общества, суть которых заключается в возвращении к религиозной вере и соблюдении таких важнейших принципов светской этики, как человеколюбие и отказ от эгоизма.

Ключевые слова: упадок духовности, болезнь, безразличное отношение, секуляризация, вера, здоровье

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Introduction. The decline of spirituality, defined as humanity’s loss of its “spiritual health,” is being discussed in various spheres of public life. Both foreign and domestic cultural figures, clergy, politicians, and members of the public are speaking out about the onset of this phenomenon and its consequences for society. Contemporary scholars attribute the relevance of the discussion on the decline of spirituality in society to the widespread availability of the Internet, as well as to the expansion of opportunities for photography and videography, which allow people to post, store, and disseminate various types of information online that demonstrates not only “noble” deeds but also, at times, the immoral behavior of individual citizens. Therefore, according to philosopher V.P. Kokhanovsky, we cannot say today that technological progress runs parallel to moral progress.

Dissertations and scholarly articles by Russian scholars such as M.O. Bayramova, V.V. Grishin, K.S. Talanova, S.V. Smirnov, and R.N. Sabirova are devoted to the problem of the decline of spirituality in modern society. However, the most comprehensive studies related to the concept of the decline of spirituality as a “spiritual illness” of society were presented in the works of P.P. Kalinovsky, “Transition: The Final Illness, Death, and Beyond”, and V.A. Elfimov, “The Christian Doctrine of Illness and Pain”. The aim of this study is to examine the problem of the decline of spirituality based on the works of Russian religious philosophers. Research objectives: to identify, in the works of Russian philosophers of the 19th–21st centuries, the causes of the decline of spirituality in society; to analyze the possible consequences of this “spiritual illness”; and to describe initiatives aimed at the spiritual renewal of society.

Materials and Methods. The research methods employed include descriptive, historical, and comparative approaches, with deductive and inductive methods playing a particularly important role. To demonstrate a positive view of the role and significance of illness in Christian doctrine, the authors analyze and synthesize references to attitudes toward this phenomenon found in the writings of Russian religious philosophers. The dialectical method is employed in this work.

Results. It should be noted that interest in the problem of the decline of spirituality as a “spiritual illness” of society emerged in Russian scholarship at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, which can be explained by the large-scale sociopolitical upheavals taking place in the country at that time. Russian thinkers believed that spirituality could be defined in both a secular and a Christian sense: “in the former, it boils down to emotional depth, morality, intellectuality, and cultural refinement; in the latter, this concept is viewed in a religious context and is linked to the notion of the ‘blessed’” [1]. Russian religious thinkers, noting the decline of spirituality, define it as a dangerous spiritual state characterized by the rejection of traditional moral and ethical guidelines, the loss of meaning in life and its devaluation, the absence of a desire for creative activity, and, most importantly, a person’s estrangement from God, thereby combining in their works both the secular and Christian meanings attributed to the concept of spirituality. In their view, the decline of spirituality hinders the consolidation of society and its further development, leading to conflict and ruin.

In this context, the decline of spirituality began to be examined in Russian philosophy in the second half of the 19th century in the works of V.S. Solovyov. The categories of “life” and “death”, “illness” and “health” were repeatedly explored by this thinker in a number of his works. Reflecting on health and illness, V.S. Solovyov wrote in his work: “No one, it seems, doubts that health, generally speaking, is a good, and illness an evil; that the former is the norm, and the latter an anomaly; one cannot even define what health is except by calling it the normal state of the organism, and there is no other definition for illness than ‘a deviation of physiological life from its norm’” [2, p. 462].

V.S. Solovyov identified humanity’s violation of one of two types of laws of existence as the cause of its loss of health; the first of these govern physiological processes on earth, while the second are responsible for spiritual processes. By living in harmony with the laws of the first type and following the rules of hygiene, a person can preserve their physical health; by following the laws of the second type, they can remain a highly moral being. The philosopher identified the underdeveloped will of people manifested in their inability to restrain their natural desires as the causes of the spiritual decline or “impoverishment of the spirit” in modern society. V.S. Solovyov considered examples of spiritual decline to include not only the vices of individual people, such as usury or a craving for gambling, but also major international military conflicts, the complete eradication of which he deemed impossible. Just as it is impossible for a person suffering from chronic illnesses to achieve a complete recovery, it is impossible to establish peace throughout the world. However, in his view, it seemed possible in this case to provide society with “palliative care” in relation to major international conflicts. At the same time, the philosopher saw a certain positive aspect in the existence of such conditions: “In the face of moral disorder within humanity, external wars have been and may still be necessary and beneficial, just as, in the case of profound physical disorder, such pathological phenomena as fever or vomiting are necessary and beneficial” [2, p. 462].

V.S. Solovyov lamented that modern society fails to understand the true causes of its own spiritual decline, showing indifference to individual instances of moral decay. In contrast to a society experiencing spiritual decline, a spiritually healthy society strives to preserve and engage in creative activity in the world around it. The concept of spiritual decline in 19th-century Russian philosophy included religious faith as an essential and central element. V.S. Solovyov believed that Jesus Christ was and remains the pinnacle of spirituality among humankind.

S.L. Frank, a follower of V.S. Solovyov’s philosophy, defined spirituality as the result of human interaction, as the fullness of being, which is far richer than individual philosophical categories such as “justice” or “freedom,” but rather as the unity of these and many other concepts in God. The thinker considered the absolute cure of any society from all manner of vices to be impossible, since he linked its development to specific sociopolitical and economic conditions of existence that do not allow for their complete elimination. According to S.L. Frank, genuine spirituality is not detached from reality; it is organically woven into it, since it manifests itself not only in human thoughts but also in human actions: “The ‘ideal’ and the ‘empirical principle’ of social life are both, in essence, rooted in the unity of life as spiritual life, and it is only in this rootedness and interconnectedness that the essence of the truly living forces of social existence lies...” [3, p. 103]. According to S.L. Frank, a distinction should be made between “objective spirituality” and “subjective spiritual life.” “Spiritual life, being at its core life in God or divine-human life, is the all-encompassing fullness of life; and since the true ideal can only be the realization of true being, the ontological foundation of existence, then such an ideal of spiritual and, consequently, social life can only be concrete universal unity, the living fullness of spiritual existence” [3, p. 107]. S.L. Frank emphasized that the development of spirituality has deification as its goal, and its ideal is Jesus Christ.

The idea of the decline of spirituality as the cause of societal ills took concrete form in the works of 20th-century Western religious thinkers, among whom the concepts of S. Freud, E. Fromm, K. Jaspers, and M. Unamuno were the most influential. In contrast to Russian religious thinkers, Z. Freud and E. Fromm attributed the decline of spirituality to cultural and economic mechanisms that hinder the fulfillment of human biological and social needs, while K. Jaspers and M. Unamuno believed that the primary cause of this state of affairs was the replacement of religious culture with secular culture. In his work “General Psychopathology”, K. Jaspers wrote: “The individual is not merely the sum of hereditary factors (only the prerequisites and conditions of his material existence can be considered such a sum); he is ‘directly created by God’” [4, p. 900]. According to this thinker, the impoverishment of spirituality in a person can lead to even greater misfortunes than the repression and suppression of sexuality within them. M. Unamuno cited aggression and people’s hidden despair as signs of spiritual decline in society.

Contemporary Russian religious thinkers P.P. Kalinovsky and V.A. Yelfimov have made a significant contribution to the study of the decline of spirituality as a cause of an unhealthy society; in their works, they established a connection between the decline in the level of spirituality in society and the manifestation of phenomena that can be compared to the symptoms of an illness. P.P. Kalinovsky explored the historical aspect of this problem using the example of ancient Roman society, whose decline and fall the thinker attributed not only to external factors but also to internal ones: “The cause was the illness of the people, the loss of spirituality...” [5, p. 21]. According to this thinker, the cause of ancient Roman society’s downfall was not so much the immoral behavior of its citizens and their impunity as it was their indifference to what was happening.

P.P. Kalinovsky attributed the decline in spirituality in modern society to its secularization, as well as to legislative changes that influence interpersonal relationships by drastically reducing the number of obligations and increasing the number of rights and freedoms: "The norms of behavior established by all the great religions are becoming a thing of the past. New norms, easier and more pleasant than those by which people lived for several millennia, are being recommended and adopted" [5, p. 15]. The thinker believed that modern society is characterized by a loss of "faith in all things spiritual" [5, p. 12]; it is not love and friendship but money, property, and entertainment that are universally recognized as the highest values. The Russian thinker and physician P.P. Kalinovsky bitterly observed: "Life boils down to a ceaseless pursuit of entertainment and a search for ever-new sensations, even if they are fleeting and meaningless. However, a life devoid of inner substance turns out to be unnecessary and empty" [5, p. 18].

According to another contemporary Russian thinker V.A. Elfimov, the situation of spiritual decline in society is evidenced first and foremost by the prevalence of indifference toward resolving pressing moral problems: "It is worse when a person ceases to feel, i.e. to respond to the suffering of the world. It has long been said that all crimes in the world are committed through the indifference of the apathetic" [6, p. 73]. Another contemporary Russian thinker, V.A. Kuvakin, holds a similar view: "Life becomes all the more twilight-like, flawed, and weakened the more it is afflicted by inhumanity. The worst thing that can happen to a person is for the anti-human element within them to prevail" [7, p. 190]. In addition to indifference, the decline in the level of spirituality in society is also evidenced by the lack of love among its members toward one another, as well as the rise in hostility, crime, and war. Following Jean Baudrillard, V.A. Elfimov compares the cult of money in society to a person's cancer. Just as capitalist production generates an excess of goods and services that cause suffering due to the inability to acquire them, so too does the number of cells grow in the body of a person with cancer.

Thus, the concept of spiritual decline as a "spiritual illness" of society, as articulated in the works of V.S. Solovyov, continued to develop in the works of S.L. Frank, P.P. Kalinovsky, and V.A. Yelfimov. These thinkers attributed the manifestations of spiritual decline to a lack of compassion, aggression among people toward one another, military conflicts, as well as such human vices as greed, vulgarity, and gambling. It should be noted that all of these thinkers agreed that a manifestation of spiritual decline is the indifference of the majority of society toward the immoral behavior of its individual members. Among the causes of spiritual decline, Russian religious thinkers cited the secularization of society, legislative changes that alter people's perceptions of their rights and duties, a weak sense of willpower, as well as the cult of money and material values.

Beginning with V.S. Solovyov, Russian religious thinkers have agreed that a complete and final victory over all of humanity's vices is impossible. However, they considered the spiritual struggle against certain causes and consequences of society's spiritual decline to be entirely realistic. In this regard, it is of particular scholarly interest to examine several projects aimed at the spiritual revitalization of society.

V.S. Solovyov's project involved adhering to the fundamental tenets of Christian doctrine, as well as observing the norms of secular ethics: "...to set our lives right, we must pray to God, help one another, and set limits on our sensual desires. There are three actions constitute the entirety of one's personal or private religion: prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. But a person does not live solely a private life, but also a public one, they live in the world. Living in the world, one must live in peace" [8]. At the same time, the philosopher attached particular importance to spiritual fasting, the observance of which, in his view, is especially important for politicians, whose temptation by power poses a danger not only to themselves but also to the rest of society.

S.L. Frank believed that the primary means of spiritual healing for society is communion: an inner, organic unity that involves the merging of "I" and "you" into "we" while preserving individuality. The philosopher spoke of sociality as the primary characteristic of human beings and rejected the idea of individualism. Establishing social bonds between people contributes to the strengthening of mental health and allows one to experience calmness and confidence: "'We' is, therefore, a kind of primary category of personal human and thus social existence" [3, p. 51].

P.P. Kalinovsky's project is based on the idea of spiritual healing as a long-term process of preparing the believer's soul for eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in Me has eternal life" (John 6:47). According to the thinker, this process includes, among other things, visiting a cemetery as a "place of light," a place where "the living and the dead meet," for the purpose of reflecting on the meaning of life: "In a cemetery, thoughts about the transience of life, about the spiritual, and about the meaning of death arise naturally and, to some extent, bring comfort" [5, p. 363]. A person should not be ashamed of their tears, as they alleviate suffering. By believing in God, people find peace and begin to truly appreciate life; they gain the strength to transform the world around them.

According to V.A. Yelfimov, the spiritual healing of society is possible through the lens of "freedom of choice." It is up to each person to decide how to view their illness: as a punishment or as a trial, as evil or as good. At the same time, the author notes that illness in and of itself is neither one nor the other. A positive view of illness is beneficial, as it encourages a reassessment of one's life, promotes positive change, and helps a person grow closer to God. The most

important component of spiritual healing is repentance, which V.A. Yelfimov considers a full-fledged spiritual practice involving regular self-reflection.

Thus, a common feature of the projects for the spiritual revitalization of society proposed by Russian religious thinkers was the presence of religious faith, the purpose of which was not only to find the peace, energy, and strength necessary for transformation in everyday life, but also to bring God and humanity closer together. In addition to religious faith, these thinkers advised people to avoid conflicts, to analyze and improve their own lives, and to help those in need.

Discussion and Conclusion. A study of the works of religious thinkers who address the issue of the decline of spirituality, as society's loss of its own "spiritual health," allows us not only to gain an understanding of the causes and consequences of this condition but also to identify ways to combat it. Russian religious thinkers of the past and present agree that the decline of spirituality affects not only the mental but also the physical health of all members of society, threatens to devalue and strip life of its meaning, and leads to anxiety as well as interpersonal and international conflicts. According to V.S. Solovyov and S.L. Frank, prayer and spiritual fasting, as well as a sense of spiritual unity with other members of society, can help alleviate the consequences of this condition. According to P.P. Kalinovsky and V.A. Yelfimov, analyzing and rethinking one's life, repentance, and visiting a cemetery can help a person find inner peace, achieve tranquility, and draw closer to God.

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