

# Paradoxical Hope: Fr Aleksander Schmemann's Sermons on Radio Liberty

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**Abstract:** This article explores Father Aleksander Schmemann's radio broadcasts that began in 1953 on Radio Liberty, coinciding with Joseph Stalin's death. The article argues that his broadcasts represent a unique form of hope, particularly from an Orthodox Christian perspective. A core aspect of his theological thought emphasizes personal religious experiences, both internal and external, expressed effectively through literature and poetry. The article examines one of Fr Schmemann's sermons, which discusses Russian poet Joseph Brodsky's poem "The Meeting of the Lord" ("*Sretenie*"). Through this sermon, the article demonstrates Fr Schmemann's view of literature's role in conveying spiritual insights. It underscores Fr Schmemann's belief of the significance of personal religious experiences in one's relationship with God, conveyed primarily through words, whether in liturgical settings or creative expressions like poetry. This profound connection between language, faith, and personal experience forms the foundation of Fr Schmemann's paradoxical hope, inspiring him to reach out to a distant and suppressed audience.

**Keywords:** Liturgy; Experience; Word; Poetry; Meeting

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## Introduction

In 1953, the same year that Joseph Stalin died, Father Aleksander Schmemann began broadcasting a series of sermons on Radio Liberty. From a studio in New York, he spoke weekly for thirty years to an audience he had never met in a country where he had never been, the Soviet Union. He had nothing in common with his listeners but language and the culture steeped in this language, Russian language and Russian culture. These weekly sermons could have been a hopeless endeavour; he did not even know if anybody would listen. Yet he continued. I argue that Fr Schmemann's broadcasts demonstrate hope, a different kind of hope that is paradoxical, but which nevertheless shows us what hope can be from an Orthodox Christian perspective.

Fr Schmemann's seemingly simplistic sermons do not only teach a kind of Orthodoxy Christianity 101 to his listeners, but are also a way for him to convey his understanding of the concept of the Word, Logos. He seems

to realize that his sermons allow his listeners to participate in a personal experience of the sacredness of language. One of the central aspects of his theological thought is the emphasis on personal religious experience; a personal encounter with God which reaches beyond both itself and the self of the individual. This encounter continues in two directions: it is internal, in that it nurtures further spiritual growth, as well as external, when the experience is shared with others. The spoken words of a voice carry within themselves an inspirational seed for their listeners. Thus, testimony of a personal encounter with the Truth – Logos – Christ creates a two-dimensional relationship. One is vertical with the Triune God, whereas the other is horizontal, with fellow human beings. For Fr Schmemmann, literature, and especially poetry, contains the most powerful examples of this salvific process and therefore become the central focus in several of his sermons.<sup>1</sup> Here, I have chosen his sermon on the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky's poem "The Meeting of the Lord" ("Sretenie," 1972)<sup>2</sup> to demonstrate Fr Schmemmann's interpretation of the salvific role of literature. However, this particular sermon needs contextualization before it can be analysed; therefore, I will first discuss his understanding of the Sacrament of the Liturgy.

Throughout Fr Schmemmann's weekly sermons, there is an organic unity between his liturgical experience and the themes that he selects. Most of his sermons were published in English translation in 2021.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the recordings are available on the YouTube channel *Rasshirenie Mirovozreniia* (*Expansion of the Worldview/Ideology* – my translation) so that we still today can hear his distinct baritone voice.<sup>4</sup> Whether one reads or listens to him,

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1 "Whatever they may claim, no matter what nonsense we are fed by the state-approved literary critics, what remains striking is this undeniable, obvious link between Russian literature and God, this pervasive sorrowful longing for God and, at the same time, this praise of him." A sermon on 'A Single Intuition,' Alexander Schmemmann,, *A Voice for Our Time, Radio Liberty Talks*, Vol. 2, transl. by Alexis Vinogradov and Nathan Williams (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2021), 185.

2 "The Meeting of the Lord' (Sretenie) by Joseph Brodsky," in Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 206–10.

3 The collection of sermons of Fr Schmemmann was published for the first time in Russian in 2009 by Saint Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Institute in Moscow in two volumes as transcriptions of archived audio files located in the archives of the Radio Liberty and Saint Vladimir's Theological Seminary in Yonkers, NY. Translation and publication in English was done by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press in 2021.

4 The YouTube Channel in Russian *Rasshirenie Mirovozreniia* published Fr Schmemmann's sermons pronounced by him at Radio Liberty for thirty years. There are eleven audio parts available on the YouTube channel. The first part titled *Vera i Neverie* can be seen/

his approach to the Orthodox faith appears steeped in his experiences as a priest. From the first sermon, "I believe in God..." to the last, he covers numerous theological themes,<sup>5</sup> yet always considers them in the light of his own personal religious experience:

The whole point of Christianity is that it has made the value of religion dependent on how it solves the religious problem—that is, how it answers the question that is addressed to each person and requires an extremely personal response... Christ only spoke about faith. Faith only can be personal.<sup>6</sup>

He follows the generic tradition of sermons, which emphasizes the preacher's personal experience and encourages his listeners to initiate or continue with their own spiritual awakening.<sup>7</sup> He also seems to understand that the sermon, as a genre and a part of liturgy, may have been absent in the lives of his listeners in the Soviet Union. The communist state was atheist and actively, even violently, persecuted religious speech. Those who attended church services would not hear sermons based on personal religious experiences. Soviet authorities sent "listeners" to church to ensure that the priests' sermons were nothing but short briefings about schedules, feasts, or topics sponsored by the state such as global peace movements or freedom for nations still under colonial rule.<sup>8</sup>

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listened to here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0czWAb2I-6U> (accessed 3. 7. 2023).

- 5 The editors selected approximately 560 sermons into seven categories: Faith and Unbelief, Man, Sources of Christianity, Religious Experience, and United in What is Essential (On Christian Culture), Feasts, and the last category, Christianity and the World.
- 6 Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 16.
- 7 Traditionally, in the Orthodox Church, the didactic aspect of preaching proceeds from a missionary approach of *martiria* where personal witness ties both theory and practice. Anastasios Yannoulatos, Orthodox Archbishop of Tirana and All Albania and one of the leading Orthodox missionary theologians through his missionary and academic work represents a contemporary example of the *martiria*, in which preaching is one of the essential aspects. See: Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ's Way, An Orthodox Understanding* (Boston MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010); Nicholas Tsirevelos, "Christian Witness, Communication and Education: The example of Archbishop of Tirana, Durres and all Albania Anastasios (Yannoulatos)," *Theology & Culture* 1:1 (2020), 9–32, [https://www.academia.edu/43542063/Christian\\_Witness\\_Communication\\_and\\_Education\\_The\\_example\\_of\\_Archbishop\\_of\\_Tirana\\_Durres\\_and\\_all\\_Albania\\_Anastasios\\_Yannoulatos](https://www.academia.edu/43542063/Christian_Witness_Communication_and_Education_The_example_of_Archbishop_of_Tirana_Durres_and_all_Albania_Anastasios_Yannoulatos) (accessed 4. 7. 2023).
- 8 The best known case from the 1970s was a Moscow priest Father Dmitri Dudko (1922–2004), who tried to follow the traditionally established practice of using a sermon as a way of personal witness with didactic intention. He asked his parishioners to write their questions anonymously and, in his sermons, he answered them. After several months of preaching about faith in response to those questions and doing it from his

Such sermons were disconnected from the personal and religious life of ordinary Soviet citizens.<sup>9</sup>

Fr Schmemmann understood the Soviet context and knew its hostility toward religion. He used his sermons to introduce “forbidden” topics, via clandestine broadcasts, to his “imaginary” flock.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, he avoided open criticism of the political system, as he believed that this external, repressive context could ultimately not restrict internal, personal religious experiences. Thus, he speaks to an individual person in the USSR, rather than to the Soviet context *per se*.<sup>11</sup>

In the first published sermon, “I believe in God...,” Fr Schmemmann focuses on what he calls the “personification of Christianity.” The sermon is part of a theme entitled “Faith and Unbelief.” This sermon, together with several

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own personal experience Father Dudko started to face various forms of prosecutions and arrests which finally led to his public humiliation in 1980, when he was forced by the KGB to confess his ‘anti-Soviet’ activities on the Soviet TV. These “activities” included his sermons that were nevertheless able to circulate as *samizdat* among a great number of readers and finally were smuggled out of the USSR and published in French in 1976 and English in 1977. See Dmitri Dudko, *Our Hope* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977).

- 9 *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* (The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate) is the official newsletter of the Russian Orthodox Church and the issues published in the period between the 1950s and mid-1980s cover predominantly the official views of the Russian Orthodox Church presented on domestic or international arenas mostly omitting spiritual and theological topics relevant for the further growth of local parishes or individual persons.
- 10 Radio Liberty started its programming in 1953, broadcasting news and information into the USSR in Russian and other national languages spoken in the former Soviet Union that could not be censored by the Soviet authorities. Three years earlier Radio Free Europe had been established with the same mission but targeting only the former Soviet satellite states in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe - Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. These two corporations finally merged in 1976. On the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty official website it is written that: “The ‘radios’ provided news, features, and music aimed at communist and non-communist elites as well as the general population. RFE and RL also gave a voice to dissidents and opposition movements that, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, would emerge as leaders of the new post-communist democracies.” See more about the RFE/RL history and mission on its official website: <https://pressroom.rferl.org/history> (accessed 7. 7. 2023).
- 11 In his essay on Solzhenitsyn published originally in *Vestnik KSKhD* in Paris in 1970, Fr Schmemmann writes: “The Soviet world is so organically and wholly his world, his reality, that it is possible to say he is free not *from* Soviet reality, but *within* Soviet reality.” Alexander Schmemmann, “On Solzhenitsyn,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 3:9 (2008), 72–87, <https://www.communio-icr.com/files/schmemann35-3.pdf> (accessed 14. 11. 2022).

others, shifts the listeners' focus toward their inner being and their own experiences of personal encounters with God. This focus on the person and on variations in religious experiences continues in other sermons, for example, "Men," "Sources of Christianity," "Religious Experience," and "United in What is Essential." In them, the main theme is the relationship between a person's religious experience and how the person's creative power is embodied in different cultural forms, especially in literature and poetry. Between 1970 and 1971, his talks focused specifically on the relationship between faith, context, and the works of several Russian writers and poets. The historical period these talks cover is extensive: from Peter the Great until 1971. In Russia, these sermons form a separate volume called *Osnovi Russkoj Kultury* (Foundations of Russian Culture).<sup>12</sup>

In the final set of sermons, "Christianity and the World," Fr Schmemmann articulates the idea of wholeness, the starting point of which is the act of creation and the fulfilment of which happens in the return back to God. The main role in this process is given to the human being, who, as the steward of creation, together with his or her own return to God simultaneously returns with him or herself the rest of the creation. Therefore, I argue that Fr Schmemmann's paradoxical hope is ultimately realized in eschatological reality.<sup>13</sup>

### 1. Literature based on personal experience

Juliana Schmemmann, Fr Schmemmann's wife, writes in her memories that her husband was a man of words who enjoyed reading, teaching, writing, as well as giving talks and sermons. According to her, poetry was an inseparable part of his identity: he read extensively and often memorized poems by heart.<sup>14</sup> His love of poetry informs his approach to language and his understanding of the sacred significance of words. In his talks, culture, and especially Russian

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12 The book was published in Russian as *Osnovi Russkoj Kulturi* in 2021 by the Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University of Humanities in Moscow, Russia. See Aleksandr Schmemmann, *Osnovi Russkoj Kulturi* (Moscow: Pravoslavnii Sviato-Tikhonovskii Ghumanitarnii Universitet', 2021) See more on the official website of the university: <https://en.international.pstgu.ru/> (accessed 8. 7. 2023).

13 Fr Schmemmann's idea of wholeness occupies one of the primary places in a work published first in 1963 and entitled *For the Life of the World*. During the time of the book, Fr Schmemmann continued with his regular weekly sermons in which these ideas became inseparable elements.

14 Juliana Schmemmann, *My Journey with Father Alexander*, second edition (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2007), 88–89.

literary culture, becomes connected with his eschatological and soteriological views. The dream of Russian literature, Fr Schmemmann maintains, is to unite heaven and earth.<sup>15</sup> For him, poetry can express insight and inspiration which cannot be expressed through formal academic theological language.<sup>16</sup> His understanding of the power of poetry seems to illustrate his idea of the personification of Christianity, which receives its highest expression through the soteriological aspect of poetry where both poet and readers meet through “sacred words.” This meeting through words also brings readers to an encounter with their own internal religious awakening: the initial spiritual impulse initiates further religious conversion, which leads toward the *eschaton* as a person’s final destination.

In the sermon “Witnesses,” Fr Schmemmann explains the term “personal religious experience” as the experience of a human being’s encounter with God. He shares his vision of such an encounter and cites the Old Testament scene in the Third Book of Kings (in the Western Christian tradition, the Second Book of Kings) in which God encounters the Prophet Elias through a still small voice. For Fr Schmemmann, God’s “still small voice” is found in poetry. The human part in this act of synergistic meeting with God is to be able to hear that “still small voice.”<sup>17</sup> It is a voice that is tangible, yet elusive. In poetry, there is no abstract “humankind,” he argues, that can be described by science. Rather, this voice can only belong to singular, inimitable, living, concrete persons who do not completely fit into any law. God reveals Himself directly to each of them through poetry, in which words become symbols that tie the inexpressible with the expressible.<sup>18</sup> “Every poem is a victory,” he declares.<sup>19</sup> What is won here is the truth of the meeting between God and a human being – that it has happened. Poetry witnesses this meeting both

15 Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 189.

16 In one of his observations about a famous Russian poet Alexander Sergeievich Pushkin (1799–1839) and the role of poetry in the expression of theological doctrines experienced through a person’s life, Fr Schmemmann writes: “After all, it is one or the other: either poetry, art, and literature are mere décor, life’s ornamentation, something for recreation; or else they are a whole unique expression of what is deepest in man. It is clear to all of us that Pushkin is not just for fun, not simply a diversion, but the embodiment of truth in beauty and beauty in truth. But then this verse also, which expresses such perfection, such solemn simplicity, is part of Pushkin’s soul and our own, and it too is truth, as necessary to us as it is to him.” Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 200.

17 Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 169–71.

18 Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 75.

19 Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 207.

to those who write/recite and to those who listen/read. He reminds us that nothing external can stop poetry from transmitting the still small voice. It will always witness the encounter between God and a human being: "[...] one thing cannot fail to astound us: the higher and more pure man's experience, and the more authentic his creativity, the more obvious is his religious inspiration, and the clearer in him is tremulous, radiant awareness of God."<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Fr Schmemmann's concept of the word

I interpret Fr Schmemmann's belief that the word receives its unique, authentic, and personal features – the inherent sacredness of language – in the connection between Logos and *Golos* (the Russian word for "voice"). For him, a literary/poetic word is always invested with religious power. Thus, the sacredness of language appears in the identification of the eschatological soteriology with literary creativity based on religious experience and practice. The starting point for any analysis of his concept of the Word must be liturgy: this is the time and space in which he was most comfortable and where he gathered his ideas.<sup>21</sup> Juliana Schmemmann notes the importance of liturgy in his life:

But in the early morning Liturgy was a blessed time spent in the Kingdom. For him, it was everything – the joy of nature, the opportunity to empty himself from daily cares, the standing at the foot of the cross, the ultimate joy of Communion at the Altar because it is where he wanted to be since early childhood, where he preached the Kingdom, where he suffered the most and was the happiest. Why suffered? Because that is where he actually felt the inadequacy of his life, of what he was trying to do, to teach, to preach – inadequate because the Kingdom was where he was during the Liturgy and the Kingdom is love and peace and thanksgiving.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> All the works of Fr Schmemmann have strong liturgical connotation. However, it is especially the focus of two of his well-known works: *The Eucharist*, which was published posthumously in English in 1987 and *For the Life of the World*, his best-known and most translated publication. As he wrote himself in the introductions of both books, they came out as reflections based on his own religious experience, especially from its liturgical aspects. Both books cover all parts of the central sacrament of the Eastern Church where Fr Schmemmann found inspiration for his interpretation of the meaning and role of words in their sensuality and physicality. See Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World, Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 7; Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Schmemmann, *My Journey with Father Alexander*, 86.

For him, liturgy is unimaginable without words in their written as well as oral forms. His perception of liturgy as the reality of human participation, through the Communion with Christ, in the eschatological nature of Church as the Body of Christ, is founded upon an ancient Christian perception of the words. A contemporary Orthodox theologian, Fr Cyril Hovorun, writes that from the earliest days of the Church, the concept of the words was expressed in a triangular circulation based on the relationship between God and people. According to this early Christian perception, there are three types of words. The first type is directed from God to people through His revelation written through the texts of the Old and New Testament. The second type are words of humans written or spoken toward God both individually and communally. Finally, the third type represents Christians' experiences of their relationship with God shared with other Christians.<sup>23</sup>

In Fr Schmemmann's texts, especially his comments on Liturgy, all three types of sacred speech appear in the sacrament of the Liturgy. There are readings from the New Testament, the Gospels and Letters of the Apostles; there are liturgical prayers; and, finally, the entirety of the liturgical act serves as a collective witness of personal religious experiences which invites others to participate in this sacred gathering. This perception echoes the Apostle Philip's words to Nathaniel: "Come and see" (John 1:46). Fr Schmemmann says of the centrality of the Eucharist: "Meanwhile, all early evidence we possess points to the fact that the *gathering* or *assembly* (συναξίς) was always considered the first and basic act of the eucharist."<sup>24</sup> He builds his concept of the words on his liturgical experience of this triangular circulation, where all three types of speech receive their full realization in the Divine revelation, a person's experience of God, and his/her internal necessity to witness to this experience.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Cyril Hovorun, *Eastern Christianity in Its Texts* (London – New York – Dublin: T&T Clark, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2022), 237–39.

24 Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 15.

25 The concept of internal necessity to witness experienced relationship with God serves as the central point in Anastasios Yannoulatos' description of the Orthodox understanding of Mission, where he argues that this concept prevails in the missionary work of the Eastern Orthodox Churches throughout the centuries. See Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ's Way* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010) and *Facing the World; Orthodox Thoughts on Global Perspectives* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007).

The triangular perception of the words appears elsewhere in the Christian tradition of the East, from the earliest days of the Church, especially in the fields of Christology, and more particularly in doctrines concerning the Incarnation of Christ as well as in comparative approaches between a theology of the Incarnation and the act of Creation. This is first mentioned in "The First Apology" by Justin Martyr, also known as the Philosopher (born between 90–100 and died around 165).<sup>26</sup> The concept of words entered into Russian thought with the rise in religious philosophy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Initially, the concept focused solely on the relationship between word and reality.<sup>27</sup> However, the interest in words migrated from philosophical and academic circles to become a living part of liturgical and spiritual praxis.<sup>28</sup>

In texts on his personal spiritual experience, especially from a liturgical aspect, Fr Schmemmann keeps returning to the concept of the words. This concept, from the Sacrament of the Eucharist, became central to his missionary vision. Throughout the thirty years in which he broadcast sermons to the Soviet Union, the primary source of his talks is the Sacrament of Eucharist. In it, he sees the salvific action as a sacred movement. This sacred movement is conveyed in words that transmit the entire liturgical act and thus reveal the eternal truth. He understands words as bearers of the truth, which is not only an experience of this sacred movement, but also the rule of life and the rule of faith which are organic and essential parts of Church tradition.<sup>29</sup> The words as bearers of the truth that we experience in the liturgical act have the same role of transmitting (revealing, witnessing) this truth experienced in liturgy in the educational (catechetical, missionary) aspect of the Church:

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26 See A. W. F. Blunt (ed.), *The Apologies of Justin Martyr: Ancient Text and Translations Edition* (London: Halcyon Book, 2006).

27 See Prot. Sergei Bulgakov, *Filosofia Imeni* (Paris: YMCA, 1953) and *Svet Nevechernii; Sozertsaniia i umozreniia* (Moscow, 1917); Alexander Potrebniia, *Mysl' i iazyk* (Kiev: Gosuderstvennoe Izdatelstvo Ukrainii, Kiev, 1926).

28 Stephen Pax Leonard, "Words to Things: Religious Cosmologies in the Context of the (Russian) Orthodoxy Philosophy of Language," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 22:65 (2023), 145–58, <https://thenewsri.ro/index.php/njsri/article/view/365> (accessed 30. 8. 2023).

29 Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life: Christian Development through Liturgical Experience* (New York: Department of Religious Education of the Orthodox Church of America, 1993), 7.

It is certainly of importance to us that this catechesis was liturgical in its character. The explanation of Scripture, the unfolding of the meaning of the Creed (i.e. Church doctrine), the teaching of morality – in other words, the entire content of Christian education – was transmitted in direct connection with liturgical services, partly even during such services.<sup>30</sup>

Fr Schmemmann emphasizes the non-static transmitting aspects when he discusses the form of the words in liturgical and catechetical contexts. Moreover, he underscores a person's relationships and personal experience as the primary source when he writes about the meaning of the words: "The question may seem a naïve one, but one cannot really act without knowing the meaning not only of action, but of the life itself in the name of which one acts."<sup>31</sup>

Here, Fr Schmemmann enters into dialogue with early twentieth-century Russian religious philosophy. He considers whether or not words can be seen as entities infused with a cosmic force that comes from a greater power – in his context, from God – through His relationship with a person. He proposes that words are not entities that only fulfil their roles as transmitters. Rather, he sees this transmitting role as an aspect of the word's external form that appears simultaneously within the constitution of the word in its wholeness. Through the relationship between God and a human being, the truth reveals itself from God's side and the human's experience of this truth becomes verbally expressible. When a person verbalizes this relational experience with God, this experienced truth (God who reveals Himself to a person) is infused into the word and becomes a constituting part of it. Thus, the word is the verbal expression of the relational experience and a product of the synergic work between God and a human being.

I argue that Fr Schmemmann's emphasis on the words as the vessels of the revelation of God's truth and the verbal expression of human's experience of this Divine-Human salvific relationship proceeds from his understanding of

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30 Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life*, 8–9. Words as bearers of the entire sacred movement organically tie liturgy with Church mission (Great Commission – Mt. 28:18–20) where the truth is unfolded through words – through readings from the Bible and liturgical texts and prayers and they, as Fr Schmemmann notices, need to be pronounced aloud as was the ancient practice in the Church. See Ciprian I Streza, "Understanding the Liturgy's true meaning to counter church secularization: Father Alexander Schmemmann," *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 79:1 (2023). Art. #7892, 9 pages (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.7892>).

31 Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 14.

the importance of the two-dimensional (horizontal and vertical) relational experience in the spiritual life of person. Stephen Pax Leonard writes that the Orthodox Christian understanding of words, especially in the theological works of Vasili Rosanov and Fr Sergii Bulgakov, is based on world-reality relations revealed through experience:

Language is a web of experiences and these personal experiences should be at the center of language study and not on the distinct periphery. Ethnography should surely be about experiencing the reality of things, and not just defining things... Bulgakov reminds us that for Protestantism the ministry of the word is 'meaning' only, but Orthodoxy understands the 'power' of the word and this ministry forms the basis of its sacramental life. Words for these Orthodox thinkers were roots of cosmic self-expression and word-symbols are interconnected with the elements of the cosmos itself. They referred to a connection between words, spirituality, and the sacred and its connection was not characterized by bipolarity. They believed that if we no longer perceived words as simply shells for entities and instead as symbols, living entities and bearers of energy, then we would embrace a richer, more holistic and multi-dimensional ideology of language.<sup>32</sup>

Fr Schmemmann centres in his texts as well as in his talks on the God-human relationship. This is the place of participation of a human being in the sacramental, especially Eucharistic, life of the Church. This is where a person's search for the truth receives its conclusion by giving the person the role of *homo adorans*, who through his/her acts of blessing God offers to God the gift which God gave to a human to take care of – the creation:

As Christians we believe that He who is the truth about both God and man, gives foretastes of His incarnation in all more fragmentary truths. We believe as well that Christ is present in any seeker after truth. Simone Weil has said that though a person may run as fast as he can away from Christ, if it is toward what he considers true, he runs in fact straight into the arms of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

For Fr Schmemmann, the ultimate goal for a human being is to become a part of the Sacrament of Eucharist, which is the entrance of a human being into unity with God, where he/she now as the member of the Church experiences the complete joy of this salvific unity. Consequently, we are called to witness this joy into the world. This becomes for the Church her central act – *central liturgia*<sup>34</sup> – the action of witnessing, which directly proceeds

<sup>32</sup> Pax Leonard, "Words to Things," 145–58.

<sup>33</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> My italics.

from the Eucharist and is also embodied in words as the constitutive parts of this experience. The bond between the Sacrament of the Eucharist and personal witness (mission) is as natural as it is continuous:

The proclamation of the Word is a sacramental act *par excellence* because it is a transforming act. It transforms the human words of the Gospel into the Word of God and the manifestation of the Kingdom. And it transforms the man who hears the Word into a receptacle of the Word and the temple of Spirit... This is why the reading and the preaching of the Gospel in the Orthodox Church is a liturgical act, and integral and essential part of the sacrament. It is heard as the Word of God, and it is received in the Spirit – that is, in the Church which is the life of the Word and its ‘growth’ in the world.<sup>35</sup>

These words show that for him, personal experience is the zenith of the Divine-human unity offered through the Sacrament of the Eucharist and can be expressed only through verbalization. The liturgy is an example of verbal expression that can be used in all other personal experiences – sermons, prose, or poetry – and it can witness faith and affect and/or inspire others. Here, we see the foundation for what I have chosen to call his “paradoxical hope”: what it was that inspired him, and kept motivating him for thirty years, to offer catechetical talks to people he never met. Moreover, his emphasis on the relational experience in both “Liturgy” and “Liturgy after Liturgy”<sup>36</sup> reveals why he was interested in verbalized expressions of human creativity, such as prose and poetry.

### 3. Brodsky’s poem “The Meeting of the Lord” – Metaphor for Schmemann’s talks

Fr Schmemann’s emphasis on the personification of Christianity through the act of the inner encounter of God with a concrete person can be demonstrated through a consideration of his discussion of Brodsky’s poem “The Meeting of the Lord.” Speaking about the poem, Fr Schmemann explores how words become bearers of an experienced truth which, in its turn, is transmitted through verbalization.

<sup>35</sup> Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> To find more about the Orthodox Christian perception of missionary work and witness see: Ion Bria, *Liturgy after Liturgy, Mission and Witness from An Orthodox Perspective* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1996).

Brodsky dedicated "The Meeting of the Lord" to Anna Akhmatova, a prominent twentieth-century Russian poet.<sup>37</sup> The poem is based on the event described in the Gospel of Luke 2:22–29, in which Mary and Joseph, following the Jewish law, bring their first-born child forty days after his birth to the temple to dedicate him to God. In the temple, they encounter two other important Biblical figures, the wise and holy man Simeon and the elderly prophetess Anna. Simeon takes the child in his arms and confesses Christ's Divinity as he pronounces prophetic words about his salvific death and Resurrection. The prophetess Anna gives praise to the Lord for being chosen to meet the incarnated God – Logos – the Messiah for whom both of them were patiently awaiting. The early Church incorporated this Biblical event in its liturgical life, but during Justinian's era the Feast, known now as the Presentation or Meeting of the Lord, was celebrated more splendidly.<sup>38</sup> Brodsky's poem, which uses the same Biblical plot, made a strong impression on Fr Schmemmann and he shared this impression with his listeners. It seems to me that the poem, together with his discussion of it, can serve as a metaphor for his radio talks: it reflects his paradoxical hope.

This biblical story, as just noted, describes the encounter between Christ – the Incarnated Logos – and two individuals, Simeon and Anna, as well as their meeting with Mary and Joseph. For Fr Schmemmann, this encounter appears to provide also a model for his thirty years of transmissions to his listeners in the Soviet Union. Simeon was searching for the Truth – the Messiah – and, at the very end of his long life, he encounters the truth. He takes the incarnated Logos, holds the Messiah in his arms, and reveals to the world the experience of this encounter. Simeon's words become this experienced Truth, not simply about any truth, and his words went through the walls of the temple. They both shocked and surprised the world which received this ultimate truth – the incarnated Logos – the Messiah, in an unexpected time and place. Nevertheless, Simeon holds the Truth and bravely shares it with the world. His own words, while holding the Messiah, represent the moment when the Logos becomes *Golos* (Voice):

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37 The entire text of the poem in Russian can be found here: <https://www.culture.ru/poems/30582/sretene> (accessed 15. 3. 2023).

38 See more: Nikolai Velimirovic, *The Prologue from Ohrid*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Western-American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 2008).

The rustle of time ebbed away in his ears.  
 And Simeon's soul held the form of the Child –  
 its feathery crown now enveloped in glory –  
*aloft, like a torch, pressing back to black shadows,*  
*to light up the path that leads into death's realm,*<sup>39</sup>  
 where never before until this present hour  
 had any man managed to lighten his pathway.  
 The old man's torch glowed and the pathway grew wider.

The paradoxical hope of Fr Schmemmann's radio talks lies in his unwavering belief that a human being is called to witness – to speak only of the truth – and to give his personally experienced truth a verbal form. He sees a person's encounter with God in the reality of liturgy expressed through its verbalization, which is also reflected in all other aspects of a person's life, which as the poem shows, is entering into a reality known as "Liturgy after Liturgy". He too is moved to witness, and his witness takes the verbal form of a voice that travels across the Earth every Sunday. He saw his witness as following in the tradition of Russian literature, which he also recognized as a witness to an experienced reality. For him, Brodsky reflects the same sacred tradition through his poem. This understanding of words stands in stark contrast to the mundane language of his contemporary American society, which he saw as "noise" rather than a voice:

We live immersed in events and problems, and in their endless, dull and noisy discussion. We are inundated by a constant stream of words, inflated and diluted by the muddy sludge of all kinds of propaganda and smug, worthless truths, acquired without any labor or effort.<sup>40</sup>

Words cannot be spoken before the labour and/or effort of experience – before they become an expression of the human part of the salvific encounter between God and humankind, they are "worthless." We must contemplate in silence to gain the ability to listen and to hear that "small still voice" of God somewhere inside us. In "The Meeting of the Lord," Fr Schmemmann finds examples of this stillness in individuals, such as Simeon and Anna, who practiced silent contemplation for decades. Unlike noise filled with meaningless words, voices hold experienced truths and the force of the cadence, the authority, and the wrath, and the joy reaches people. In this process, the voice destroys the barriers that divide speakers from their listeners. He

<sup>39</sup> My italics.

<sup>40</sup> Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 206.

maintains that words, once they pronounce the experienced truth, “destroy something, break and sweep away something hindering them, something that gives them no space in this dim, deaf air, space and time, which are stripped of the acoustics of the spirit.”<sup>41</sup> Here, he returns to his understanding of the nature of the words in which this sacred mystery constantly remains completely unfolded.

Fr Schmemmann sees in this encounter between the content of the word and a revealed God the soteriological and eschatological aspect of poetry, which does not simply conclude in the voice-transmitted truth and disappears somewhere in the ether. Rather, words with their authority and authenticity continue to reach others, as the New Testament declares: “The spirit breathes where it wills... but you do not know where it comes from and where it goes.” (John 3:8). The salvific aspect of poetry is also in its audible form, when it is being heard. He listened to Brodsky recite this poem and contemplated the continuation of this salvific process:

When the voice falls and silence ensures, it is not that the reading is finished, it is not that a poem has been presented to us in its completeness, but rather that a certain high, pure and bright thing has been done, a good deed for all those blind and deaf people who do not understand, do not know and do not see what kind of fight is fought in this world at the ultimate depth, or for what it is fought.<sup>42</sup>

The soteriological aspect of his approach to poetry does not only gesture to the Divine-human encounter, but also to the importance of the meeting between the poet and his listeners. This meeting reflects the meeting between him and God in the reality of Liturgy. In Brodsky's poem, this kind of meeting is described in Mary's meeting with the prophetess Anna and Simeon. When she brings the Messiah in her arms into the temple, she shares the Truth

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41 Fr Schmemmann's talk describing the occasion where he heard Joseph Brodsky reciting this poem says the following: “For a moment you are surprised, even alarmed; did his poems really sound like that when read with the eyes alone or aloud to yourself? You are almost frightened. But immediately you give yourself over to this strange, incomparable chanting, and you understand why Akhmatova called these poems ‘magical’. The spell, the force of the words, the force of the cadence, the authority, the wrath, the joy, and the strength of this force, as if these poems not only have to be born in sound, to be given voice and to reach people, but also to destroy something, to break and sweep away something that hinders them, something that gives them space in this dim, deaf air, space, and time, which are stripped of the acoustics of the spirit.” Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 206–07.

42 Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 207.

with those whom she meets. These two are silent, patient, and vigilant and thus able to discern the truthful voice of Mary from the world's "worthless" noise. When Simeon receives the Messiah in his arms, he experiences his own encounter with the seen/heard truth. However, at the same time, the incarnated Christ becomes the centripetal figure who brings these three persons closer to Himself and closer to each other:

The temple enclosed them in forests of stone.  
Its lofty vaults stooped as thought trying to cloak  
the prophetess Anna, and Simeon, and Mary –  
to hide them from men and to hid them from Heaven.

In "The Meeting of the Lord," Brodsky envisions Christ as the foundation for a human being's life, which means that a human being is fulfilled in the encounter with him. Even though this process is personal, it always requires a meeting between those who are messengers and those who are listeners. In the poem, we have Mary, Simeon, and Anna whose interaction implies both silence and voice, such as in the following instances: "It had been revealed to this upright old man" or "The silence, regarding the temple's clear space" or "Mary [...] said nothing – so strange had his words been" or "deep in the hearts of all people" or "Mary, now stooping, gazed after him, silent," or "it was not the loud din..." This mix of voice and silence is also present between the poet and his listeners. Listeners sit in vigilant silence and await a voice transmitting through sacred words an experienced reality, as Fr Schmemmann sat and listened to Brodsky reciting this poem:

In the random hall in front of an almost random crowd Joseph Brodsky is reading his poems. [...] We have heard so much about him, and now we will hear him in person. He begins... not to read, for there is no text in his hands, but—what should I call it? — to sing or declaim his poems. And it becomes immediately clear that a real event is taking place here, in this room, accomplished by this voice, by this poetry, reborn in its primordial form, here before us and for us and in us. The sound of his voice... For a moment you are surprised, even alarmed: did his poems really sound like that when read with the eyes alone or aloud to yourself?<sup>43</sup>

He considers the meeting between Mary, Simeon, and Anna around the baby Christ in their midst through the prism of his personal experience of the encounter with this biblical truth in the voice of Brodsky. When Fr Schmemmann positions himself as a listener, he reminds his listeners that

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<sup>43</sup> Schmemmann, *Voice for Our Time*, 207.

a voice is able to transmit the truth only if it proceeds from the experienced encounter with it. On the other hand, one needs to observe vigilant silence in order to hear this voice.

## Conclusion

Was anybody listening to Fr Schmemmann and his Sunday catechetical talks? Did he actually cut through the noise of the communist, atheist Soviet Union? We know that he did. We know that after one particular person listened to his sermons, neither Russian literature nor Soviet history were ever quite the same again. This person was a captain in the Red Army, an ex-prisoner in the Gulag, and, when he started listening to Radio Liberty in the 1950s, an exiled schoolteacher teaching mathematics in Kazakhstan. He was also an aspiring writer and, furthermore, an aspiring Orthodox Christian. His name was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He appreciated the hands-on catechism offered by Fr Schmemmann's sermons and they would leave an indelible mark on all of his future writing, by his personal experience of participating in the concept of the words that Fr Schmemmann offered. Together, they shared the same paradoxical hope. Solzhenitsyn must have realized the hopelessness inherent in the idea of becoming a Christian writer in the atheist Soviet Union, but that did not stop him. Just as Fr Schmemmann conquered the hopelessness of being alone in a studio speaking to strangers across the globe, Solzhenitsyn held out the same hope. And they both continued. Paradoxically enough, when they would eventually meet, they found more differences than similarities between them – but that is a story for another article.

I conclude today with how Fr Schmemmann describes what helped him conquer his hopelessness, when he sat in a New York radio station studio and spoke to his listeners across the globe in the USSR every Sunday for more than 30 years. The final purpose of the concept of the words expressed in the liturgy and subsequently through its mission – the “Liturgy after Liturgy,” in all its varieties including prose and poetry – is to bring a human being into the eschatological reality and for us to gain eternal life. This, for him, is not a transmission of “religious knowledge,” but the completion of the salvific history on a personal level:

The word presupposes the sacrament as its fulfilment, for in the sacrament Christ the Word becomes our life. The Word assembles the Church for his incarnation in her. In separation from the word the sacrament is in danger

of being perceived as magic, and without the sacrament the word is in danger of being 'reduced' to 'doctrine.' And finally, it is precisely through the sacrament that the word is interpreted, for the interpretation of the word is always witness to the fact that the Word has become our life. 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.' (Jn. 1:14). The sacrament is his witness, and therefore in it lies the source, the beginning and the foundation of the exposition and comprehension of the word, the source and criterion of theology.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 68.