

Dialogical Orthodoxy in the Theological Vision of Anthony Bloom

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Abstract: This article deals with the dialogical approach of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom. It offers a short outline of his life and the formative influences on his thought. Then it analyses some concrete themes of Metropolitan Anthony's theological reflections: these are dialogical personalism, a scientific approach to theology, the story of the two trees in the Garden of Eden, which symbolise two ways to God, namely, the contemplative and through experimental knowledge of the created world, and his ideas about the unity of Christians and the ecumenical movement. Finally, the conclusion offers an overview of his dialogical approach and its relevance for the contemporary world.

Keywords: Anthony Bloom; dialogue; science; atheism; Orthodoxy; ecumenical movement

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Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (born Andrei Bloom, 1914–2003) was a prominent and widely known Orthodox public personality in the West. He was in charge of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate diocese in the United Kingdom from 1957 until his death. He lived in a pluralistic society, in an age when science tried to replace religion. He managed to preserve an uncorrupted religious belief, reconciling the gap between religion and secularism. His public speeches were popular for their humanism, openness, and, at the same time, genuine Christian fervour. He was Eastern Orthodox, however, he felt at home in Western culture. The Orthodox community gathered around him paid due attention to English culture and incorporated both the use of the English language and local traditions. In essence, Metropolitan Anthony was in many ways open to dialogue, although he rarely used the word “dialogue” itself.

In this article,¹ I point to a few ideas of metropolitan Anthony, which are still of interest and importance today. To start with, I make a few references to his biography, in as far as they are relevant for my topic. Then I demonstrate

1 This article is a part of the research project entitled “Dialogical Nature of the Orthodox Theology in Modern Britain: Anthony Bloom, Kallistos Ware, Andrew Louth,” funded by the Grant Agency of Charles University (reference number 291323).

that his theological vision was developed within the intellectual context of the Paris School. After this I elaborate on his original “scientific” approach to theology which seemed to be fruitful for reconciliation within and outside Christianity. Then I add a few words on his hope for a dialogue between religion and secular society. Finally, I analyse his thoughts about the unity of Christians and steps towards inter-Christian rapprochement. I think that his contribution to these issues remains relevant in our admittedly different, but no less problematic age.

Orthodox Bishop in the West

The life of Metropolitan Anthony has already been afforded considerable attention,² so I will limit myself to a very brief outline. Andrei Bloom was born in 1914 in Lausanne, Switzerland, to a family of Russian diplomats.³ However, the outbreak of the First World War and the following revolution in the Russian Empire changed the social status of his family dramatically. His father, Boris Bloom, had received his last appointment to Persia, but very soon he had no state to represent as the Russian Empire had ceased to exist. The family had to emigrate and eventually found themselves among the poorest social strata in France. His parents divorced. His mother sent him to the cheapest boarding school in Paris, where he suffered from a great deal of physical and psychological violence. This lasted for around three years but caused him a psychological trauma and led to a loss of faith.

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- 2 He himself gave numerous accounts of his life, especially its early stage. See, for example, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, “Without Notes,” in his *Encounter*, trans. Tatiana Wolff (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 165–214; Anthony Bloom, “Interview with Archbishop Anthony Bloom,” by Timothy Wilson, in Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *School for Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 5–23. Currently, there are also two biographies of Metropolitan Anthony: Gillian Crow, *This Holy Man: Impressions of Metropolitan Anthony* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), and Avril Pyman, *Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh: A Life* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2016).
 - 3 His mother, Kseniia, was a daughter of the Russian diplomat Nikolai Scriabin and his Italian spouse Olga, and a half-sister to the composer Alexander Scriabin. His father, Boris Bloom, was also a Russian diplomat with some distant Scottish ancestry. So, Andrei was of a mixed origin. However, he did not feel himself as “half-Italian.” He found Italian culture and mentality, due to its southern temper, quite distant from his own and acknowledged that “Italy is probably the last [country] in which I would choose to settle” (Anthony of Sourozh, “Without Notes,” 167).

The young Andrei reconnected with God when he was about 14 years old, almost physically, while reading the Gospel. The feeling of the living presence of Jesus Christ he observed was so influential that he decided to dedicate his whole life to Christ. This event became in some ways foundational for his worldview. He changed his attitude to people: he stopped perceiving all those who were outside his closest circle as dangerous and hostile and started to see in them children of God, meaningful and important.⁴ He also felt an acute need to share the truth about Jesus Christ – who revealed himself to him as life, joy, and meaning – with other people. Immediately he started to talk about this with his classmates, friends, and even occasionally people in the metro.⁵ His religious experience taught him that the good news of the Gospel has no boundaries, either confessional or cultural. Thus, it strengthened his open attitude to the world. Moreover, a genuine religious experience became central for his later theological reflections.

Despite this bright spiritual revelation in his teens, the journey to the priestly ministry was long. On the advice of his father, he obtained first a medical education, studying Natural Sciences and Medicine at the Sorbonne between 1931–1939. Thus, he was just finishing his studies at the outbreak of the Second World War. For this reason, he started at once to work as a surgeon. During the war, he secretly helped people persecuted by the Nazis and assisted the resistance movement by producing false medical documents. In 1943, he was secretly tonsured as a monk by his spiritual father, Archimandrite Afanasii Nechaev, who died the same year from cancer.⁶

In 1948, as a result of several happy coincidences, Anthony was ordained to the priesthood and appointed to serve in the United Kingdom, at first as an Orthodox chaplain of the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius, and soon in a parish of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate

4 Anthony Bloom, "The Atheist and the Archbishop," interview by Marghanita Laski, in Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *God and Man* (London: Darton, Longmann, and Todd, 1971), 12–13.

5 Anthony of Surozh, "Life for me is Christ...", in *Encounter*, 244–46.

6 Archimandrite Afanasii also helped Jews during the war and was twice imprisoned by Gestapo. He was both times released, perhaps due to his bad health condition, but did not stop to hide and help Jews until his death. See memories about him, for example, Monahinja Genovefa (Lavrova), "Vospominanija ob arhimandrite Afanasii (Nechaev)," v arhim. Afanasij (Nechaev), *Ot Valaama do Parizha* (Moskva: Fond "Duhovnoe nasledie mitropolita Antonija Surozhskogo", 2011), 213–20, accessed on January 17, 2025 at https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Afanasij_Nechaev/vospominanija-ob-arhimandrite-afanasij-nechaeve/.

in London. In 1957, he was consecrated as a bishop and was elevated to the rank of metropolitan in 1966. Between 1963 and 1974, he also held the position of the Exarch of the Moscow Patriarchate in Western Europe, residing between Paris and London. However, it was too time-demanding and exhausting, so he asked for dismissal from this post, and spent the rest of his life in the United Kingdom.⁷

As is obvious from this short outline, he never obtained any official theological education. In fact, however, he was deeply read in the authors of the so-called Paris School.⁸ In his talks, he often referred to Sergei Bulgakov, Vladimir Lossky, Georges Florovsky, Lev Zander, Olivier Clément, Lev Gillet, and others. He also recollected his personal conversations with Vladimir Lossky.⁹ It is clear that the Paris School indeed had a great impact on his theological vision. At the same time, he was not limited by the range of topics which they discussed and reflected on many other issues as well.¹⁰ He was

7 It is worth noting that, on the hand, he was extremely loyal to the Moscow patriarchate, to the Soviet church, because he saw the Church in the Soviet Union as a victim of persecutions. He wanted to be in solidarity with the persecuted. At the same time, he did not pay attention to the fact that this church was an instrument of the political goals of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, he was one of the most liberal Orthodox bishops. He often spoke to secular audiences. He also as early as 1990 supported the independence of both Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and asked patriarch Aleksii II to give it the Tomos of Independence (see, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, "Letter of 21 October 1990 to Patriarch Aleksii II," in Pyman, *Metropolitan Anthony*, p. 167–8).

8 Comprised of the theologians gathered around the Institut Saint Serge, the Russian Orthodox theological school founded in 1925 in Paris by Russian exile theologians.

9 The first edition of the collection of the last talks (2001–2002) of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh was published in English as Anthony Bloom, *On the Light that Shineth in the Darkness: The Last Talks* (London: Metropolitan of Sourozh Foundation, 2014). Later it appeared in both Ukrainian and Russian translations. In Russian it was published under the title Antonij Blum, *Uverenost v veshhah nevidimyh: poslednie besedy (2001–2002)* (Moskva: Nikeja, 2014), also available online on a web page of Christian texts called *Azbuka.ru*, https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Antonij_Surozhskij/uverenost-v-veshah-nevidimyh-poslednie-besedy/#source. In the following year it was also translated into Ukrainian as Mitro. Antonij Suroz'kij, *Svitlo u temrjavi. Ostanni rozmovi 2001–2002 rr.*, transl. N. Bezborodova, L. Lisenko (Kyiv: Duh i litera, 2015). As the original version was difficult to access, hereinafter I use for page references the Ukrainian translation. However, I am grateful to the Ukrainian translator Nataliya Bezborodova, who provided me with the manuscript of the English original, so I was able to avoid the double translation. For the story about the meeting with Vladimir Lossky, see Antonij Suroz'kij, "10. Pro prysmerk istorii, besida 11 kvitnja 2002 r.", in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 130.

10 Another peculiarity of Metropolitan Anthony is that he was not an academic theologian, but mostly gave talks to a wider audience. So, it is sometimes hard to trace the exact

also well read in some midrashic sources.¹¹ Despite this, Christian-Jewish dialogue did not belong to his agenda. He used midrash mostly for deeper understanding of the Old Testament, contextualising it within Jewish culture.

Dialogic Personalism

To demonstrate his intellectual connection to the Paris School, I will point to the influence on him of dialogical personalism. All main representatives of the so-called Russian Religious Renaissance were to different degrees occupied by the idea of personalism that originally emerged in the intellectual milieu of German classic philosophy. According to it, the human being becomes a real person only when she or he engages into relations, preferably built on sincere love. Different thinkers defined these relations as those with other human beings, God, nature and even inanimate objects such as art. In the interwar period this idea served as opposition to both capitalism and totalitarianism, condemning the first for its egocentric individualism and the second for the subordination of human freedom to some illusory collective interest.

This idea became popular in European theology regardless of its denomination. But in Orthodoxy it was, perhaps, the most widespread. Orthodox thinkers also grounded it firmly into trinitarian theology.¹² They connected the terms ‘hypostasis’ and ‘person’ for the description of the three Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity and made an extrapolation to human relations: as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit dwell in each other in mutual love, so a human being, who is made as the image of the Holy Trinity, must love others to become a true person.¹³ Sometimes, this statement is perceived almost as an ancient theological dogma, though its actual roots lie in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Ancient Church Fathers indeed spoke on

works of the authors whom he mentioned as he often referred to “some” articles or books of well-known theologians, mostly from the Paris School, without giving their title.

- 11 He referred, for example, to *The Guide for the Perplexed* by Maimonides, written in the 12th century, or *Genesis Rabbah*, originating from Late Antiquity.
- 12 On the personalism of the Orthodox theologians, see, for example, Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).
- 13 See Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Dialogical Ethos of Trinitarian Theology, East and West: Theological and Political Implications,” *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 5.2 (2022): 223–51.

the relations of love between the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. However, an articulation that a human being becomes a person only in relationships belongs to the modern age. It has also served as one of the rationales for the ecumenical dialogue.

Metropolitan Anthony had inherited this idea from the Paris School. However, it remained on the margins of his theological thought and he did not speak on it often. He appropriated dialogical personalism more for the explanation of theodicy, claiming that God had initial tragedy in Godself as the mutual love of three persons demands constant self-denial and remains sorrowful.¹⁴ But, more interestingly, he also developed an idea of differentiation between an individual and a person. For him, the individual is the smallest measure of division. The individual strives for self-assertion and tries to resist absorption. There is a distance between her or him and other individuals. Individualism involves rejection, negation of another or a group.

On the contrary, the term “person” has its roots in Scripture and implies complementarity: “It is characteristic of personality that it does not differ from others by contrast, opposition, self-assertion – personality is not repeatable.”¹⁵ The exhaustive image of personality is contained in revelation – it is a unique name given to those who deserve the Kingdom of God. He explained that according to Jewish tradition, name and personality are identical when the name is spoken by God. He then continues:

We do not know what ‘personality’ is in the primordial state precisely because of the catastrophe of the human fall [...]. In consequence, instead of being a harmony composed of unique but not self-confirming or opposing beings, a consonance, whose key is God, we know personality only through the divisive and tragic prism of individuals.¹⁶

Only Jesus Christ is the perfect person. But Christians should try to imitate Him, to become “living temples enlivened by the Holy Spirit, to grasp the reality of personality and nature, overcoming the opposition and separation to which separateness leads.”¹⁷ Through love, encounters are transformed into relationships where one’s self moves from the centre to

14 Antonij Suroz’kij, “13. Buti pravoslavnim hristijaninom, besida 30 travnja 2002 r.”, in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 170.

15 Antonij Surozhskij, “O samopoznanii. Vystuplenie v Zheneve pered molodezhnoj gruppoj 3 nojabrja 1969 g. Per. s franc. T. Majdanovich,” in Antonij Surozhskij, *Chelovek pered Bogom* (Moskva: Medlennye knigi, 2019), 136.

16 Antonij Surozhskij, “O samopoznanii,” *Chelovek pered Bogom*, 137.

17 Ibid., 140.

the periphery. He concluded that personality is the internal, divine image of the Living God in a human being and it is this that we should strive for. However, this obvious path into more engagement with dialogical personalism made by Bloom did not become a kind of philosophical framework central to his theology. Nevertheless, he shared not only the ideas, but also the open spirit of many of the Paris School and can be regarded as one of its later representatives.

Scientific Approach to Theology or the Two Sides of the One Coin

One of Bloom's most interesting contributions lies in the integral comprehension of science and religion. He was active in a period when science was often thought of as able to replace religion. And, on the other hand, some more fundamentalist ecclesial circles demonstrated a hostile attitude to science. They perceived the rejection of modernity in general and science in particular as a heroic Christian fight against "the prince of this world." Metropolitan Anthony was able to reconcile science and religion in his theological vision. Moreover, he introduced an original and productive "scientific" approach to theology, which justified reconciliation between Christians. What it means and how it works will be discussed in this section.

Trying to get closer to the mystery of God, Metropolitan Anthony resorted to what could be called a scientific method. He did not take the side of either a cataphatic or apophatic way of thinking about God. Instead, he compared theology to the natural sciences, pointing out their common principles of thinking. Having a degree in natural sciences and medicine, he mentioned that no scientific theory is sufficient to describe a phenomenon in its completeness. A physical or natural phenomenon is reality, it actually exists. However, no theory in physics is able to present the full explanation of what it consists in or how it functions. Thus, every theory should be perceived critically and should be questioned. And, it is quite likely that the theory that is now considered to be credible will be soon revised or even replaced. To illustrate his idea, he recalled the lecture of Professor Maurice Curie given in his student years at the Sorbonne, where the former insisted that the atom is the smallest particle of material that could not be split, and that the destruction of the atom would lead to a terrible explosion.

When the time went by, however, the scientists established that neither of these was true.¹⁸

Thus, scientists have faith and hope that there is a certain scientific secret that they want to discover. Every scientist understands that any theory only approximately describes reality and therefore questions it. It is not the reality that is questioned, but the theory that describes it. Scientists rejoice when they stumble upon a fact that does not fit into their theory, but rather undermines it and forces them to rethink it or make further research.¹⁹

As every theory in natural sciences should always be questioned, the same, according to Metropolitan Anthony, relates to theology. He stated that God is a reality known not only from religious tradition but also from direct spiritual experience. However, this reality is so much greater than any human comprehension that all theological statements and religious texts are unable to adequately describe it. Here he also loosely quoted Gregory of Nyssa as follows: "if we create a complete, integral picture of everything that we have learned about God from the Holy Scriptures, from Divine Revelation, from the experience of the saints, and imagine that this picture gives us an idea of God, we have created an idol and are no longer able to get to the real, living God, who is all in dynamics and life."²⁰ So, all theological knowledge gathered together is by no means able to reveal the mystery of God in its fullness. However, based on this provision, Bloom did not opt purely for apophaticism but instead for a constant questioning and reconsideration of one's beliefs.

He insisted that a believer should be honest to him- or herself and should not accept obscure passages from Scripture with false piety, but honestly admit that he or she does not understand them and thus ask questions about them. Moreover, this relates not only to unclear passages. Even the religious knowledge that seems to be obvious to a believer at a certain moment of his or her life might be reconsidered in a process of spiritual maturity. This is because both the growth of closeness with God and life experience may reveal to a believer a new depth and meaning in those articles of faith that seemed to be transparent and clear. As he put it: "At every point our knowledge of God may be true but it may be the truth of this moment which

18 Antonij Suroz'kij, "7. Pro dva shljahi piznannja Boga, besida 21 ljutogo 2002," in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 88–92.

19 Antonij Surozhskij, "O vere. Serija besed, prozvuchavshaja v ruskoj religioznoj programme Bi-bi-si (1972 g.)," in *Chelovek pered Bogom*, 40–41.

20 Ibid., 44.

corresponds to our spiritual width and depth, and growth.”²¹ Thus, questioning does not testify to the lack of faith but, on the contrary, to its certainty.

A believer should also analyse the Holy Scriptures. As Metropolitan Anthony expressed it: “When we say that the Scriptures are the word of God, yes, they are, but before we can understand them we must grow into communion with God Himself not with a dictionary, not simply by searching the meaning of words but by searching the heart from which they come and the heart into which they fall, that is our own heart.”²² In other words, a believer should distinguish the intentions and meaning of the word of God from its rigid and restrictive formulations, always made in a concrete language and in particular historical circumstances.

In fact, this approach indicates the dialogic nature of the relationship between a human being and God. In comparison to science, and of a believer in some way to a scientist, he or she is presented not as a passive listener and obedient executor of God’s commandments, but as a creative and important participant of mutual relations, who remains in a constant search for comprehension and unity. Regarding science itself, Metropolitan Anthony did not advocate for dialogue between it and religion. This was because for him they were too inseparably connected: not only in the similarity of their methods, but also in their common origins.

In his late years, he developed a theory that the tree of knowledge of good and evil from the Garden of Eden opened up a pathway for an experimental comprehension of life. He was deeply concerned with the question of the responsibility of God for the human fall. He insisted that God, having planted in Eden the tree of knowledge, made possible human sin. In such a way, God became co-responsible for the fall of humanity. Seemingly, Bloom found somewhat problematic the standard teaching of the Church that the tree of knowledge guaranteed freedom for humanity, for if there is no free choice to sin or not to sin, there is no liberty as well. As God made people free, he also left them a choice. Metropolitan Anthony coped with this ethical problem developing the idea of Irenaeus of Lyon, which he found in an unattributed article of Olivier Clément.²³

21 Antonij Suroz’kij, “1. Pro zapituvannja, besida 4 zhovtnja 2001,” in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 14.

22 Antonij Suroz’kij, “12. Pro trudnoshhi rozuminnja, besida 16 travnja 2002 r.,” in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 153.

23 Antonij Suroz’kij, “6. Pro grihopadinnja, besida 31 sichnja 2002 r.,” in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 68–73.

So, Metropolitan Anthony built on the idea that the tree of knowledge was just another way, although long and complicated, back to God. He presented it as follows. Adam and Eve were innocent in paradise. So, Eve did not have sinful wishes and any desire to resist or act against God. In her naivety, she believed the serpent tempter. Eating from the tree of knowledge seemed to her as just another way to know more about God and something that she could do herself, without God's direct revelation. However, the meal turned out to be a sin and human beings lost their original integrity and started to feel shame. Nonetheless, it was Cain's descendants who built cities and created complex human culture.

In fact, Eve had the right intuition as every knowledge of created things may lead us back to their creator. This is true for an artist and his or her paintings, for the writer and their novels, but this is also true for God and his creature. But the fact of disobedience to God and as a consequence, sin, meant that this knowledge was neither completely clear nor unproblematic. The process of getting knowledge became blurred, darkened by the twilight of God's initial uncreated light. Nevertheless, it is still possible, and the discovering of artistic and natural wonders may still point to the Creator. God did not plant a tree of death, but a tree of *knowledge*.

This theological vision supported Metropolitan Anthony's conviction that art, literature, and, of course, science, should not be disregarded by believers. Quite to the contrary, they might be theologically important and offer deeper knowledge of God. Even if they fail to do so, they at least may bring a sense of wonder about the created world. Thus, the way of scientific or artistic knowledge of the world is just another way to God as compared to religious practices.²⁴ These two ways are symbolized by trees of life and knowledge from the Garden of Eden. Thus, Metropolitan Anthony did not talk about dialogue of religion and science, as for him they were not opposite sides in dialogue or worldviews, but a complementary reality.

Dialogue of Faith with Secular Society

Instead, Metropolitan Anthony raised the question of the importance of dialogue between religion and atheism. He maintained that atheism and religion share common ground – a belief in the human being. This means

24 Antonij Suroz'kij, "7. Pro dva shljahi piznannja Boga," in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 84–86.

a conviction that every human being possesses something good in them, a desire to love, to act rightly, that they have compassion and vision. As he put it: "Every reformer, every person who calls people to something new, bases his call on faith in man; and in small things, in everyday life, everything is based on this faith that there is something kind, something good in man, that can respond to need, to sorrow, to joy, that can serve as a basis for how to build life."²⁵ It is in some senses similar to the modern notion of "people of good will" that, however, embraces everyone. He further clarified that this belief is not a gullible persuasion that all people are sympathetic and responsive, but a conviction that there is something humanly deeper in every person.

So, Christianity and atheism have already a solid crossing point. Further, they both suggest that a person may be properly educated or intellectually shaped. This may serve as a starting point for a further dialogue on the question as to what exactly does it mean to be a good person, to be fully human?²⁶ He complained that there has never been a sincere dialogue yet, although there was a promising potential.

Of course, being a devoted Christian, Metropolitan Anthony found atheism problematic. He observed that a person may come to an atheistic worldview for one of two main reasons: either he or she was simply accordingly raised up and educated, or they found atheism comfortable because the assumed absence of God would release them from moral responsibility. As an illustration for the second point, he referred to a life story of an educated migrant from the former Russian Empire. The latter realized that he became an atheist in childhood after stealing some money from a blind beggar to buy himself a toy horse. Prior to this shameful event, he was a pious child who had attended church services with his parents. But after this, he began to doubt the existence of God as this existence made him feel uncomfortable. After a few years, doubts turned into convinced atheism.²⁷ So, one's atheism may be a weapon against remorse. However, in those cases, where it is not a comfortable shelter for human sins but a sincere worldview, Metropolitan Anthony was optimistic about the prospects of its dialogue with Christianity.

25 Antonij Surozhskij, "O vere," *Chelovek pered Bogom*, 29.

26 Antonij Surozhskij, "Dialog ob ateizme i poslednem sude. Beseda v Leningrade (15 fevralja 1982 g.) dopolnena fragmentom besedy v Moskve (dekabr' 1974 g.)," in *Chelovek pered Bogom*, 70–71.

27 Antonij Surozhskij, "Dialog ob ateizme i poslednem sude," in *Chelovek pered Bogom*, 67–68.

His contemporary society consisted not only of atheists and Christians, but also of agnostics, of people without any concrete faith, or representatives of other faiths. He held the same respect for all. As he himself admitted, "I understood a very great deal about Christianity and about Orthodoxy through reading and consorting with non-Christians, simply with secular people, with non-believers, who were, if one can put it this way, 'human beings', that is, in whom I saw real people, able to love, to make sacrifices, to feel compassion, to show mercy, to be capable of everything which is spoken about in the parable of the sheep and the goats."²⁸ He invoked here the idea that people were created as the image of God. So, Jesus Christ was not only the Son of God, but also a perfect human being. If people were free from sin they would be quite similar to Jesus in the manifestations of their humanity. So, there is nothing strange in the fact that some people, who preserved a pure heart, perform God's commandments, even if they do not know about this. However, he was also convinced that modern Western culture had been built on Christian roots and precisely this made it so human.

Openness for the Ecumenical Dialogue

Metropolitan Anthony was slightly critical about official ecumenical dialogue, accusing it of excessive bureaucratisation and politicization. He saw it like a certain illness of growth. He was optimistic about the period right after the Second World War which was marked by genuine Christian zeal and desire to know better about each other. However, in his view the subsequent decades transformed the World Council of Churches into a complicated international organization, pre-occupied too much with political correctness and social issues.²⁹

However, he was never opposed to the idea of the unity of Christians and ecumenical movement as such. On the contrary, he believed in the unity of all Christians based on true religious experience and commitment. He was convinced that Christians are divided due to differences in the philosophical languages they used for theological articulation of faith. He held the belief

²⁸ Anthony Bloom, "We Have to Bring Faith to the World – Faith not only in God, but also in Man," interview by Michael Epstein in London in April 1989, in *Encounter*, 28.

²⁹ See Antonij Surozhskij, "Sozercanie i dejatel'nost'. Beseda v Moskve, 1971 g.," in his *Trudy*, kniga 1 (Moskva: Praktika, 2014), accessed on 1 October 2024 at <https://predanie.ru/book/70302-trudy-1/>.

that the Orthodox Church preserved uncorrupted truth. However, it is the love and respect for God, and also good deeds that make people Christians, not the Creed they proclaim. In fact, the latter does not play an actual role in everyday life. He elaborated:

If we ask ourselves what it means to be a believer, a Christian, an Orthodox, I think we can say that it is a matter of the heart and of faith, understood not as blind acceptance of a Creed handed over century after century that had become more and more complex and whose very wording is less and less understandable to people, but that the centre of it is our direct relatedness to God. Do we love Him? Do we venerate Him? Do we know Him as a person? Are we faithful to this love of God and to what we call our love for Him? This is the measure.³⁰

He gently reminded his readers and hearers that the true believer, according to the Gospel, may heal the sick and resurrect the dead, and asked his Orthodox audience whether they met those criteria. He also pointed to the fact that Orthodox Christians themselves often serve as the worst advertisement of Orthodoxy, and by contrast provided an example of a French soldier, whom he operated during the war. He saved six of his military brothers from the battlefield, having sustained numerous injuries. Metropolitan Anthony described him as an example of true Christian love, although, he definitely was not Orthodox, and possibly even not a practicing Christian. He summed up many of his thoughts in the following lengthy passage:

[Understanding of the Scriptures] depends on our communion with God, not with the text, not with words, and this is where the tragedy of the dividedness of Christians comes to the fore because it is about words which we fight. When we accuse one another of heresy we accuse the wording but what do we do about the person? What do we do about the way in which this particular person communes with God, lives by God, lives in God's name? It is important for us to remember simultaneously that there is such a thing as the truth. I do believe that the Orthodox faith to the extent to which it can express things is true, but I could not believe anymore after many years of life that someone who does not embrace it cannot find salvation. [...] And also, so often, people cannot believe in what we believe to be true because we are to them a proof that our words are not true. When we speak of love and manifest none, when we speak of giving our lives as Christians for others, and I am sure we do not give anything, can anyone believe that this is the truth? So that there is a problem here or rather there is a challenge, that we cannot say that it is enough to proclaim a truth couched in words to be within the truth. We can be within the truth only if we live it.³¹

30 Antonij Suroz'k, "13. Buti pravoslavnim hristijaninom," in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 163–64.

31 Antonij Suroz'kij, "12. Pro trudnoshhi rozuminnja," in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 153–54.

He stressed that more important than the confession of the articles of faith are the fidelity of heart and recalled that only the Mother of God and John the Evangelist, who were people of the heart, i.e. loved Jesus the most, stayed steadfast with him near the cross.³² So, the Christians should follow them seeking for a heartfelt approach. These were the theological grounds for Metropolitan Anthony's open attitude to ecumenism. Now, I will also look at some of his practical advice for the achievement of such unity.

First, referring to Lev Zander's book *Vision and Action*, he compared Christians to friends, who initially loved each other, but then lost connection, because they had started to have different opinions on things. In the process, these friends became too different to each other and ended up as distant people. However, after a while, their original love pierced their heart, so they looked around searching for each other. They noticed each other in a fog and walked tentatively back. And they needed to know each other again, to ask about their experience, the things they had learnt and personalities they had become. Contemporary Christians, Metropolitan Anthony suggested, should do likewise. They should cultivate in themselves mutual respect, fascination, and love. They should first get to know each other on an interpersonal level, to discover in each other human deepness and authenticity and, finally, to know as much as possible about their Christian experience and commitment. He pointed out that various saints of the West and East used different theological terms, but had in common their knowledge of God. So, Christians of different denominations should admit:

[...] We parted at a moment when we were in search of answers, when we were asking questions, we were giving answers that could at times be incompatible with one another because they were rooted in different experiences, in different languages, in different philosophies, now we have begun to understand one another's language, now we have begun to understand that the various philosophies which entranced our ancestors were only human attempts at understanding but there was something greater – God's Revelation and life in God and we can begin to talk on that level. What have you learnt about God? [...] He died for me, He died for you and we are killing one another. O, perhaps, not always with a knife or with a gun but with a word – in our heart you are dead and I am dead in yours. Is that compatible with the faith we have in Christ, in a God Who has become man, lived, taught, suffered, died for each of us?³³

32 Antonij Suroz'kij, "13. Buti pravoslavnim hristijaninom," in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 168.

33 Antonij Suroz'kij, "14. Pro hristijanstvo ta inshi viruvannja, besida 13 chervnja 2002 r.," in *Svitlo u temrjavi*, 178.

So, he was the proponent of the idea that the achievement of unity between Christians starts from interpersonal contacts, develops through the exchange of good practices, both ministerial and spiritual, and then may somehow lead to the unity on the level of structures.

From the critical point of view, it needs to be mentioned that Metropolitan Anthony reflected in general terms, but did not go deeper in terms of overcoming practical impediments. He stressed the foundational importance of the spiritual and practical Christian experience, but did not touch the question that not every spiritual experience comes from God; in other words, some spiritual experiences may motivate people to do or justify evil. Talking about truth, he did not mention the criteria for distinguishing between truth and delusion. The absence of spiritual and moral discernment seems to be a weakness of his theology. Moreover, in keeping with a more general Orthodox way of thinking, he avoided any attempt to propose specific theological criteria for unity. He merely criticized the World Council of Churches for having establishing as a criterion belief in the Holy Trinity broadly understood, but did not offer anything else instead.³⁴ He also did not discuss any concrete steps for the achievement of the ecclesial unity of Christians, such as intercommunion, conciliarity, or any other topic present in official dialogues. So, he offered a good direction of thought, an attitude, but did not seek in any way to find a practical solution.

Nevertheless, this approach of invisible unity based on faith in Jesus Christ, proclaimed by the influential Metropolitan, was, and still is, very important in the Orthodox milieu, where either an exclusivist or fundamentalist stance remain very strong. As the contemporary Orthodox theologian Cyril Hovorun observed, denominational identities have become a much more powerful obstacle in the ecumenical movement than dogmatic disagreements, as the latter are more likely to be resolved.³⁵ So, Metropolitan Anthony's works on the formation of a positive image of non-Orthodox and the restoration of their Christian dignity were a good contribution to the demythologization of Orthodox identity. It is also important in the context of contemporary divisions within Orthodoxy itself.

³⁴ See Antonij Surozhskij, "Sozercanie i dejatel'nost'," in *Trudy*.

³⁵ See, for example, Cyril Hovorun (ed.), *Serving the Communion: Re-thinking the Relationship between Primacy and Synodality. A Study by the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group* (Los Angeles: Tsehai, 2019).

Conclusions

Anthony Bloom represented an open and searching Orthodoxy, which followed strongly in the vein of the spirit of the Paris School. He was theologically self-educated, mainly in the works of Orthodox thinkers, both Russian and converted, who acted in France. Sometimes, he directly continued reflecting on topics they proposed, like the contraposition of person and individual; at other times he dealt with topics of particular interest to him, but always preserving a spirit that was open to Western Christianity and more broadly, to a secular world.

However, the Paris School was only one of the formative influences that shaped his theology. The other two were his education in natural sciences and medicine and his own conversion to the faith due to an immediate religious experience. Original religious experience became a foundational principle, on which he based both his broad theological reflections and his dialogue with the secular world.

Due to his scientific background, he was convinced that doubt in and reconsideration of all established religious thought is no less important than doubt in scientific research. So, he opted for an openness to a reconsideration of faith in the process of spiritual growth. As a result, he developed a theological vision in which God is an objective reality, as he reveals himself to believers, while theology represents human efforts to understand and describe this reality. Consequently, God is constant, while theology is variable. This made his theological vision essentially dialogical – not in a sense of belonging to a concrete dialogue or agenda, but exposing a belief in an ongoing conversation that is able to transform partners.

In particular, he believed in the invisible unity of Christians on the level of spiritual experience and commitment. He perceived the dividedness of Christianity as a tragedy, caused by different philosophical systems, languages and historical circumstances, but not by the essence of their living faith in Jesus Christ. He was also convinced that Christians should take steps towards each other and learn from mutual spiritual experience and practical devotion.

Although he did not provide suggestions on practical mechanisms for the achievement of possible institutional unity, his guiding principles appear no less important nowadays. Moreover, namely this way has become popular in the contemporary ecumenical movement, represented, for example, by the Saint Irenaeus Group on unofficial dialogue between

the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches or the British movement of receptive ecumenism.

This approach also renders hope for the healing of extreme polarization within global Orthodoxy as such. Pointing to Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice for the life of the whole world and to individual experience of God's mercy, metropolitan Anthony opted for a *humanization* of one's opponents and finding common grounds in love and commitment for Jesus Christ. The walls within Orthodoxy that today scare with their strength may fall apart when sides start to see first humans and then brothers and sisters in one another. He completely avoided, however, the issue of human sin that causes divisions. But here it may be added that forgiveness is able to heal it.

He also found a common ground between religion and the secular world through a common faith in humanity. He advocated for active dialogue with atheism and was convinced that discussion about human dignity may bring both worldviews closer. He insisted that Christians were also guilty for the emergence of atheism as they failed to demonstrate the attractiveness of Christianity, proclaiming words without deeds. However, he saw a positive potential in the contemporary society.

He was also concerned with the problem of theodicy and the possibility of sin. He could not accept an easy explanation that evil is a result of human freedom. In this case, according to him, God would be co-responsible for sin. So, he developed an idea that the tree of knowledge from the Garden of Eden was not a tree of death, but a tree symbolizing another way to God – through independent learning from the created world, which again brought his thinking close to a scientific one.

Perhaps needless to say, his theology also had its weak points. Addressing broad audiences often does not allow for giving more precise and nuanced explanations. He spoke on TV and radio broadcasts, both for the United Kingdom and the USSR, and held personal meetings with Soviet intelligentsia and various circles in Britain. So, his audience embraced both believers and secular listeners, much more rarely academic theologians. For this reason, he did not explain theological concepts on an academic level, but tried to appeal to general reason and the emotions of his fellow human beings. That is why he often did not consider details or possible side effects of his ideas. Nevertheless, his attitude and spiritual authority were important against the background of growing fundamentalist sentiments in many traditionally Orthodox countries. His voice is no less important today, in the context of

terrible aggression of one Orthodox country against another. And it contributed to the healthy potential of contemporary Orthodoxy, quite different from the pseudo-religious “Russian World” ideology proclaimed by his mother Russian Orthodox Church today.

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