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Work as a category of medieval culture and its orthodox connotations

Abstract: In this article I present a concept and attitude towards work characteristic for the Orthodox Church in medieval Russia. I present the opinions of the saint Sergius, who saw the work as a way of liberation from the cares of the modern world, with an emphasis on modesty and poverty. Sergius and the attitude of the Orthodox Church of that time can be a model for modern people who want to get rid of social problems including addiction or illness.

Keywords: work as the value, holiness, attitude

Work has always been the main and determinative factor of all human life. It is work, where human needs can be satisfied, national wealth – created and a human being themselves and the society in general – formed and developed. The question of work is therefore one of the most important issues for humanity. The attitude of humanity to work varies from its perception as a hard necessity to “the first vital need of an all-round developed human being”¹.

The attitude to work began to form at the dawn of human history and it could be characterized as a double one, with practical and spiritual trends². The spiritual side of work relies on world-view principles, which describe every culture according to its every single historical stage of development or its type. Therefore

¹ Советский энциклопедический словарь. – М., 1983. – С.1352.

² The difference between a spiritual and a practical attitude to work was offered in soviet sociology, by such researchers as V. I. Boyko and Yu. V. Popkov.

there can be a mythological conception of work as a way to maintain world order or a religious idea of work, where the motif of salvation plays the first fiddle. Later work was treated in the spirit of protestant ethics and communism.

Christian treatment of work, which has been formed on the basis of the Scriptures, defines the modern tradition to a large extent. It fully concerns Orthodoxy, where work for others and for the high purpose is considered very significant.

According to A. Gurevitch, a famous Russian medievalist, the attitude to work in the Middle Ages was discrepant³.

This dualism had existed from the very beginning of the human history, when people were banished from the Garden of Eden because of the Fall and as a divine scourge got their punishment – to earn their daily bread in the sweat of their faces, “to work the ground from which he had been taken”⁴.

In the Books of the Old and the New Testaments the image of the world devoid of work is shown – it is life in the Garden of Eden or near Christ, where there are no concerns about our daily bread, which can appear miraculously, when it is needed.

That is why the absence of need to work in the early Middle Ages became the criterion of hierarchic inequality and “the getting of material benefits, filthy and deep concerns about livelihood became the matter of common people”⁵.

From the very beginning of the history of Christian Church a Christian has been living according to the principle “man does not live on bread alone”⁶. This appeal from the Old Testament, made by Moses in the desert during the forty year wandering of Jewish people, echoes in the New Testament with the words, said by Christ in the desert, again, where he kept the fast: “man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”⁷.

A simple, physical work consequently had little value. Anyway, it is obvious, that people can't but work in their everyday life. Therefore Christian Church had to reconsider this assessment of work. By that means the category

³ Гуревич, А.Я. Категории средневековой культуры // Гуревич А.Я. Избранные труды. – Т. 2. Средневековый мир. – М. - СПб, 1999. С – 204.

⁴ The Bible. The Books of the Old and the New Testaments. Canonical, in translation into Russian, with parallels the Book of Genesis, 3:23.

⁵ Гуревич, А.Я. Категории средневековой культуры..., op. cit.

⁶ “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (The Old Testament, Deuteronomy 8:3).

⁷ “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (The New Testament, Matthew 4:4).

of work is included into the theological framework; both in Western and Eastern Christianity “theology of work” is created.

First of all Christian Church began to regard work as a remedy against idleness. In Russian the synonyms for “idleness” are among others inactivity, aimlessness, laziness, vacuousness. It is to mention, that all these words have a negative connotation; and from the Christian point of view a human cannot live aimlessly and idly. As a result of that a human should be busy in praying or working. Work is then treated as a way to bring up a Christian and their virtues, such as humility, chastity and meekness. The definition of work’s purpose assumes importance. A human should work not for easy gain or profit; his goals are higher than that. As a result of that in the monastic practice the work of penance appears, which purpose is not understandable; moreover the tasks which a monastic novice gets seem to be senseless, like to water a dry staff in a famous parable or to plant out cabbage seedlings on a monastic vegetable garden with their roots upside down. It is obvious, that this cabbage will not grow up. But what will then? We know what the answer on that question is.

Of course not all monastic work should be done without any practical use. But it is important to know what is acceptable in the sight of God. First of all it is work on the land and other agricultural activities. Since the great part of the population in medieval Europe was made up of peasantry, their work began to get its advantages. First of all the church year coincided with the agricultural one. It began in September and finished after the harvest had been reaped. Agricultural holidays coincided with church feasts; the rhythm of life, set by nature, was considered then as divinely instituted; the compliance with it meant the rightness of life order. Our first parents Adam and Eve’s work was regarded then not as a punishment, but as an original, inborn human activity in contrast to the idleness of aristocracy, which hadn’t even existed when Adam and Eve had been ploughing up the ground.

Agriculture was allowed to monks as well. Hagiographical works give substantial evidence of that. The most famous and honored worker of Rus’ was Venerable Sergius of Radonezh, one of the saints very popular with Russian peasantry, who took the lead in working and doing deeds even when being father superior.

Sergius worked constantly, doing any work by himself. The author of Sergius’s hagiography wrote: “Venerable Sergius did every work of penance: “he carried firewood on his shoulders and after having chopped and cut the logs he delivered them to the monastic cells ... he served the fraternity diligently as though he was a slave: he chopped firewood for everyone, as he was asked to, he ground wheat

with grinders, baked bread, cooked meal and prepared other foodstuff for the fraternity, he cut and sewed footwear and clothes and having drawn water in the near source he carried it in two buckets on his shoulders and put it at his every brother's monastic cell"⁸.

The author of this hagiography work emphasizes a special Christian humility, which was shown by Venerable Sergius. It found its expression in the work of the Saint done not for himself but for the fraternity.

The commandments of poverty and asceticism in Eastern Christianity originated mendicant orders, which monks lived directly on charity for their livelihood. But according to Sergius every charity should be earned. Work is therefore rated higher and is considered more preferable than charity. The following hagiographical story gives evidence of that: "Once there lived monks, who ran out of bread and salt, there was no foodstuff in the monastery. Venerable hegumen Sergius established such order for the whole fraternity: if the monastery is short of bread or other eatables, the fraternity is not allowed to come out of the monastery and ask for charity in the countryside; the monks should stay in and pray for the grace of God. What Venerable hegumen had ordered the fraternity he also did himself, starving for three or four days.

Three days later, at daybreak of the fourth one, Venerable hegumen took a hatchet, went to a monastic elder called Daniel and said: "I heard that you want to build an entryway to your cell. I have come to you not to be idle, let me build an entryway for you." Daniel answered: "That's true, I have wanted to build it for a long time, everything is ready for that, but I'm still waiting for the carpenter from the country to come. I wouldn't like to ask for your help, because I'm afraid, that you may ask me to pay you a lot." "I will not take a lot, - Venerable hegumen said. - I wonder, if you have got some mouldy bread, I would like to eat it. I will not ask you for anything except that, because I haven't got even that. Don't say, that you will be waiting for another carpenter, because who else can be the best one?" Then Daniel fetched some mouldy bread and gave it to him, saying: "If you want this bread so much, I will be glad to give it to you, but I haven't got anything else." "I have got enough and some to spare, - the hegumen said, - but

⁸ The hagiographical text about Venerable hegumen Sergius the Miracle-Worker, written by Epiphanius the Wise (by the edition of 1646) // Horiography of Sergius hegumen of Radonezh, written by Epiphanius the Wise, hieromonk Pachomius the Serb and a monastic elder Simon Azaryin. Православная энциклопедия, Свято-Троицкая Сергиева Лавра. - М, 1997 / Библиотека Якова Кротова. [Электронныйресурс]. http://krotov.info/acts/17/azaryin/azar_1.html(access: 22.06.2014).

keep it till nine o'clock: I don't take fee, until I have finished work." Having said that Venerable Sergius tightened up his waistband and set to work. He had been hewing logs, chopping and setting pillars from the early morning till late in the evening and with the help of God he finished building on the entryway. Late at night Daniel gave him the bread for his work as agreed. Having taken the bread Sergius put it in front of him, prayed, blessed it and began to eat. Some brothers of the fraternity said: "Look, brothers, how strong patience and abstinence of this man are. He hasn't eaten for four days and satisfies his hunger with mouldy bread only towards evening of the fourth one; besides he is not eating this bread gratis, but he has paid a heavy price for it"⁹. This heavy price is the work done by the hegumen of the monastery, which is called after him and nowadays is considered the first and the most important one in Russia – The Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius.

Sergius always worked and looked as an ordinary monk. As a result of that people who came to him to make a bow or to ask for advice or blessing didn't often recognize him. There is an episode in the hagiographical text, which tells us the story about a peasant, who came to Sergius to make a bow and didn't recognize him. Sergius was working on the vegetable garden; he was happy, that the peasant couldn't recognize him, a famous hegumen. He came up to the peasant, bowed before him, kissed him with great love and praised him for having been rejected by him and taken for indigent.

The habit of working thus averts Sergius from the danger of feeling greater than the others; it tells us about his modesty and self-exactingness.

Sergius considers work as a criterion for assessing competence of those who decided to take the monastic vows. "From the very beginning of being hegumen he had such a custom: he didn't send away anyone of those who came to him to take the monastic vows (neither old nor young, neither rich nor poor one). He welcomed everyone with love and joy; still he didn't let them take the monastic vows at once but ordered them to join the brothers of the fraternity in their monastic work until they would get used to the monastic rules"¹⁰.

D. S. Likhachov, known worldwide as an expert in Old Russian culture, noted that the main virtue of Sergius was his diligence: "God made him to a toiler, a mentor for many monks, numerous hegumens, and a leader... His church service itself was connected with his manual work: "he ground wheat, sifted flour, kneaded and made sourdough to bake prosphora. Having baked prosphora he served

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

God; he didn't let anyone else bake prosphora although there were many brothers who wanted to. Venerable Sergius tried to be both a tutor and a doer (worker): he cooked kutiya (boiled rice with raisins and honey), made candles, cooked kanun (a ritual food for the memorial service, blessed by the priest)".

Since the times of Sergius peasant work and then household concerns have become therefore a constant element of pious, devotional work of Russian monks and saints. There is a great number of images of saint monks-workers in Russian hagiography, who following Sergius worked hard. Among them are St. Venerable Paphnutius of Borovsk, St. Zosima and Savvatiy of Solovki and others. The work done for the foundation of monasteries was of great importance as well. Hagiographical works give evidence of that.

"Zertsalo monachov" ("Speculum of monks" from 12th century) says: "concerns about work shouldn't distract the spirit from divine things". Modern orthodox texts tell us about a vision of a Monk of the Caves (Pechersky), who was a furniture maker (he was making furniture for the monastery). Once he had a dream about his furniture, which pieces were scattered all over the ditch. There around the Mother of God stood; she told him, that that was not the way of work, which one expected from him. They expected from him prayer, spiritual work. Thus, together with the understanding of the advantages of a physical work, there appears the realization of the importance of a spiritual and a mental work.

As a result of that the idea of work as a positively-oriented practical life and world forming activity appears in Russian Orthodoxy. This idea is up-to-date. Orthodoxy gives its example and standard, trying to oppose it to the world of money grabbing, personal gain and cold-hearted consumption. In this way work can also be considered the remedy for social illnesses; orthodox pedagogy proves that, saving people in difficult situations from committing a suicide, taking drugs, and other addictions.

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