

PAUL EVDOKIMOV, AN APOSTLE OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Abstract: Paul Evdokimov endeavored to bring into a secularized and desecrated world the solution of the Russian mystics as a means for transfiguring the bland and gray 'reality' of a world focused only on material values in which everything ends now and here without referral to the transcendent. In this mindset, only a different approach will resound in the soul and consciousness of the contemporary person and the old approaches, which appealed to fear and terror, have long lost any power of persuasion. Evdokimov believed that only a God of love could speak to the contemporary world. This paper aims to reveal the details of Paul Evdokimov's vision and solution for the moral crisis of contemporary society.

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Introduction

The works of Paul Evdokimov may be considered prolegomena that contribute to a spiritual awakening, and thus, he may be regarded as an apostle of the contemporary world, especially by youth.

Evdokimov presented, in an almost atheist Western society of deepening moral dissolution, the great themes that constituted Russian Messianism: 'The Russian Christ,' 'the mystical experience of the absolute,' and 'the Russian maximalism.' These illuminate, like similar spiritual beacons in a world influenced by boredom, a world of nonsense and absurdity, founded on profound disillusionment. The disposition of this world is captured in the works of Sartre (1997, p. 319) and Camus (1993, p. 177). Evdokimov originated from a traditionalist style Russia, where a priest's word was law with the great dignitaries of the Empire, even with the Emperor, who sought a priest's advice on crucial political decisions. In contrast, a liberal France with a cosmopolitan Paris today is dominated by a strong individualism that one could say has drifted towards frivolity and recklessness in moral values.

The image of a thinker was once that of a person who risked being ridiculed, ostracized, and banished from the world that represented false emancipation. The interwar period was a time when profound reversals took place in the consciousness of the westerners. As one realm was setting, another was born. The old order fell apart to allow another access. With the vehemence and senselessness of youth, Evdokimov wished to change all existing order from its foundations and generate a new beginning in history.

This paper aims to reveal the details of Paul Evdokimov's vision and solution for the moral crisis of contemporary society.

The Russian Messianism

The free thinking of Paul Evdokimov makes his ideas difficult to organize. Nonetheless, his thinking was neither incoherent nor scattered. Concepts were united by the recurrence of important ideas and themes. Certain methodological directions for interpreting the works of Evdokimov were needed (Klofft, 2005, p. 70). 'The Russian Christ,' 'the Russian maximalism,' and 'the mystical experience of the absolute' are some of the core work of Paul Evdokimov. Clement (1985) believed that psychoanalysis does not reduce enigmas, but rather because of the mystery of our destiny, people are attracted to God. Psychoanalysis introduced Evdokimov to the great recurrent theological themes in the last years of his life, which Clement perceived as the most prolific; those of the sacrificial love of the Father and "of the smile on the father's face" on which to contemplate for all eternity (Clément, 1985, p. 106).

A philosopher is a person of equilibrium, a pacifistic and ecumenical spirit. Love and peace cover their entire work. What is striking about Evdokimov's work is the love for others, of all creation, including demons and saints alike. He also holds an inner hope of universal rehabilitation, of an 'apocatastasis', which will emerge at the end of times. He gives the example of saints that would pray for demons. He defines the intense desire to see everyone redeemed, to be in communion with everyone.

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Evdokimov proposed that baptism and catechism, and the liturgy and holy icons, are what build the national ethos, i.e., through introducing Christian values. His Slavic speech had roots in the biblical and liturgical language. The entire Russian culture was permeated by a thirst for the absolute, for the timeless and constant aspiration of the Russian spirit, by the mystical nature. He considered that the essential mystical background of the Russian soul enters into resonance with Orthodoxy, which is the less normative form of Christianity, and expresses very little in concepts. According to Evdokimov (2001, p. 47), “the Orthodox have never had a special affinity for ‘theological sums,’ nor for scholastic systems. Any excessive wording or definition causes an immediate distrust. Orthodoxy does not need someone to phrase; it needs no phrasing.”

Evdokimov considered the mysteries of the church as part of the apophatic regime. He regarded the Fathers of the Church as having a conviction that it was inappropriate to speculate on mysteries, that it was better to contemplate them and be enlightened by their light. The Orthodox spirituality was much more liturgical and iconographic than discursive, conceptual, and doctrinaire (Evdokimov, 2001, p. 47). Evdokimov viewed this as a feature of Eastern theology, which distinguished the Orthodox spirituality from Western theology. Especially, the Russian mystics unlike the theologians of the West insisted on subjective existence, on emotion, and on feeling. Even the metaphysics of Berdiaev (1999) appeared rather like that of Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Pascal, Jakob Bohme, and St. Augustine, i.e., existential metaphysics.

According to Evdokimov (2001, p.50), the renowned Russian ‘maximalism’ is but a desire to transgress limitation and view the abyss of nothingness except the constant and quenchless thirst for the absolute: “For a Russian, the root of the soul, as in Plato, is suspended into infinity. Dostoevski is assertive: without the necessary uniqueness, without eternity, without infinity and without the absolute, sooner or later the Russian man shall refuse the accessory, the temporary, the relative; when in need, he will destroy history and shall willingly throw himself into nothingness.”

Evdokimov linked maximalism to the geography of a steppe projected without limitation in the interior landscape of a Russian soul, resistant to boundaries and compartmentalizations. He also wrote about the ‘apocalyptic mindset’ of the Russians that consists of people’s defiance against the governing spirit, all administration that remains foreign to the soul, and tries to reduce its liberties. This mindset is a manner of being, directed towards daily life and the immanent habits of the Russian spiritual matrix that views all issues through the idea of an end to the purpose of existence.

After baptism, Russian people are self-titled Saint Russia, contrary to all usages. For Dostoevski (2004), the ideal of the absolute is the only force that moves people and expresses the principle of their history. This thinking is not about the actual holiness of the Russians, who could be regarded as one of the greatest sinners on earth due to their excessive, contradictory, and passionate nature. The Russian spirit is illustrated in the novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, by their heritage that verges on the pathological, their disposition for the mental malady, and their inner conflicts that lead them into extreme and tense situations (Dostoevski, 2004, p.126). A great discrepancy grips people of other nations when they direct their focus towards Russia. Although Russians may be considered great sinners, they never appear to lose from their mind and soul their ideal of holiness, which is maximal, endless, and without compromise. The immensity and profoundness of the Russian spirit allow them always to be aware of the state they are in. The Russian soul, in its incomprehensible abysses, appears as a deep, insurgent, and threatening sea due to its unpredictability. The Russian imperialism is the worldly, mundane expression of their tumultuous soul, of the deepest anxieties that affect it. In this sense, Russians may be everything or nothing in history, but never in the middle, because this would mean their own annihilation, i.e., suicide. While they are alive, they create upsurge, outbursts, and extreme antitheses with the rational and even-minded Westerners, who could not exist more than a few moments in the carousel of feelings that animates the Russians.

The Actuality of Paul Evdokimov

To the contemporary person, the image of an almighty, tyrannical, and oppressive God has little effect. The image of the divine almightiness has been replaced by the image of a humble God, of the beggar who knocks at the door of our soul. For example: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3, 20). From the Russians’ point of view, God is the poor and humble brother, the one that is always with the poor, the disabled, and those in pain. In the painting, ‘Christ and Saint Russia,’ by

the painter Nesterov, Christ is depicted surrounded by beggars, the disabled, and the minorities of this world. Evdokimov (2001, p. 53) described how Sojenitın considered that “Russian literature is always pointed towards the ones in pain,” just as Christ who granted mercy to, healed, and comforted them. The mercy of the Russians manifested towards convicts and criminals is well-known.

Evdokimov (2001, p. 54) argued that “Christ is never depicted as a judge, and any human judgment must follow the model of Christ’s love, to look for the Pravda, untranslatable word in which justice is achieved in mercy.” He wrote how the name of ‘Johannine Christianity’ signifies that the divine is never a principle of righteousness or of power, but a fountain of fatherly love.

For many consecutive years, the image of the divine force was overbearing. In this sense, God was everything; a person was nothing before Him. Now, the fear that had followed humans for centuries no longer has an effect, but rather leads to indifference, boredom, and an enormous ‘yawn.’ Throughout history, an individual was subjected to a graphic inferring, that being sinful or not, that the individual would be put through the ‘Caudine Forks.’ Most times, a person was condemned without mercy, without the right of appeal, and this led to hostility towards the Church, followed by indifference, no longer relevant today.

Evdokimov’s emphasis on God’s love for the being, on a person’s unlimited freedom, is striking given he is known for displaying the traditionalist, conservative, rigid character of the Russian Church. This appears to be the influence of the Western spirit; it is unlikely that such a liberal vision originated in Holy Russia.

Evdokimov considers the viewpoint of a young person who is tempted to break the rules to seek solutions. He delves into specific issues, such as abortion, the control of birth, divorce, homosexuality, self-satisfaction, and adultery and prioritizes them according to their gravity. He aims to inject religious concepts into a level of society. He endeavors to institute a Christian society. He understands that all sins, i.e., all failures to meet the divine law, even subconsciously, are a consequence of human weaknesses, since the fall of Adam from heaven’s realm. In other words, people do not sin because they want to, but because they are weak.

Both Russian thinkers and existentialists believe that individuals create their destiny through the choices they make. In both philosophies, the human in flesh and bones, the living, a concrete individual that is subjected to transformation, is considered this way. For Evdokimov, theology was the experimental path to the union of an individual with God. For existentialists, the lived experiences that create the human being are what matter. An individual with a will, affections, reasoning, and instincts, i.e., the individual as a whole, is considered.

Evdokimov wrote how the contemporary person is called to perfection, feeling the calling of God. A recent inquiry in Russia brings attention to Evdokimov’s word as a younger Christian: “Christianity is everywhere, at the heart of existence, in the sacrality of motherhood, in the challenges of daily life, in the gratuitousness of love and friendship” (Evdokimov, 1993, p. 25).

In Evdokimov works, the analogy between the inflexible, rigid Church and the Old Testament becomes clear. With Paul Evdokimov, there comes a breaking point that is the gateway leading to the New Testament. The paradigm of the New Testament is creative and brings content that is completely new in comparison with the Old Testament. Paul Evdokimov is a genius who created a new individual; the Christian of today is different. What might seem a weakness and a fall in religion at first could also be viewed as the reason to consider him a creative genius. In this sense, only faith created in a completely different form might enliven the modern individual. This faith has the power to transfigure the individual. The metanoia of contemporary humans, the change in their absolute assumptions, may only be created in another thinking paradigm (Collingwood, 1998).

The following is a comparison that may seem bizarre but aims to illustrate the wealth in transforming capital of Paul Evdokimov’s works. In traditionalist Russia, religion was governed by the principle of righteousness, which also applied in the Old Testament, and activities were carried out in the classical behavior of the effect following the cause. These were well-established laws where processes were carried out with no element of surprise, unlike quantum physics where the classic laws of physics are questioned, and everything seems possible. In the later, there is the great freedom that is similar to the worldview of the New Testament, which has the principle of love as a foundation. Nevertheless, the New Testament has been forgotten by the official Orthodox Church of Russia, which is ruled mostly

by the principle of righteousness, before the coming of Christ. The statements must be regarded with care in the sense that they bear in mind the spirit of the Old Testament that hovers over the Russian Church rather than the churches doctrine and teachings that belong to the New Testament and are often forgotten. The principle of love for fellow humans is greatly emphasized by Evdokimov in following the line of the great Russian mystics who did not have a strong connection with the official Church, which supposedly built the New Deified Man. Evdokimov mentions the human being who is in various ranks of moral perfection and achieves huge leaps due only to one ingredient, called love, without which the spiritual ascent would be challenging and arduous. With the help of love and sacrifice, individuals are relieved of their sins, they are purified and evolve spiritually. Astonishment emerges because, despite this issue, the Russian Orthodox Church has an entire list of punishments and endless lists of sins, interdictions, and sanctions, that are all expediently applied. With each contact with the church, an individual receives a review that is most often negative. Due to the harshness and opacity of its treatments and methods, the church mostly succeeds in bearing its way. The contemporary atheist society is the result of its techniques, which were considered invincible throughout the previous centuries. The philosopher of the Russian exile understands that the therapy must be changed. The old methods and techniques are outworn and are no longer efficient. Most of the time they exasperate, similar to obtrusive melodies. The system that drastically penalized all deviations has a church correspondent in psychology, in the image of the sadistic father, i.e., Freud, who was in fear of castration (Freud, 1995, pp. 53–54). The Church was the one that forbade pleasure. A fleshless asceticism was vehemently preached, “at the beginning of the Great Lent, Christians were warned of the fact that the devil does not drink, does not eat, does not marry and nonetheless, he is not less of a devil” (Evdokimov, 2003, p. 59). Evdokimov had the special ability to reduce sexual sin to its true dimensions after it was obsessively hyperbolized and repeated throughout centuries. This mindset reached a hilarious situation during the Middle Ages when serious sins were elevated to a secondary level as a consequence of an exaggerated concern about the sexual sin and subsequently, exposed many details at confession. This discernment of Evdokimov is not about justifying his failing, because he led an exemplary life from a moral point of view, but is the product of his objective, even-minded thought.

Evdokimov (1993, p. 89) refers to an ascetic saying “the sun has never seen me eating, to which another answered that it has never seen me upset.” It is considered that the greatest sin in the eyes of God is hate for one’s neighbor. In this sense, one may love in vain where one cannot love their fellow human beings; any asceticism without love is pointless.

The benefits brought by science and technology may contribute toward the spiritual crisis for the contemporary person. The imperfect human being thrown into the world is like a child who runs towards its parent when there are obstacles that the child alone cannot overcome. In some cases, technology and science may provide only a momentary, superficial solution, which leaves the fundamental issues unresolved and offers the contemporary individual a hubris unequalled through time.

Some philosophers consider, that regardless of how emancipated people consider themselves, today, people remain nostalgic about a world permeated by sacredness, a lost paradise, an Eden from which they were banished and continually try to recover (Eliade, 1995, pp. 180–181). That is, it is the essential need of a human being to escape the finite, the quotidian, and the profane. According to Evdokimov (2003), the German philosopher, Schopenhauer, called a human being, ‘a metaphysical animal’, and considered that even the atheist needed an entity superior to the physical world. Thus, regardless of a person’s efforts, they would remain on the material, concrete level, in crowded situations with disease, death, and love, with the appeal of divinity imminent. These Evdokimov (2003) considered brought forward the realization of the Christ-like message in a desecrated, secularized world:

“The great tragedy of our era is neither the pain, nor the misery, or the fear, but the feeling of a huge absence. People and especially youngsters desperately look for something, often going into dangerous lands, where all kinds of servants of the ‘depth’ offer them the most bizarre and dangerous solutions”(p. 6)

Thus, the huge absence felt in this era translates to a lack of true breakthroughs where the moral benchmarks must remain alive, animated by the divine presence because otherwise, they become

meaningless words. One must have an animated connection with ethics or else it becomes a foreign concept where, in a crowded life, choosing between good and evil the formal ethics has no relevance.

Conclusions

Essentially, Christianity is Messianic, revolutionary, and explosive, with people encouraged to observe the Kingdom of Caesar or the Kingdom of God. People are called to be 'apostles' that change the world into the Kingdom of God; to sanctify and transfigure it and prefigure it for the next age. The works of Evdokimov bring to light the internalized asceticism of the layperson to which people are called, and that can be achieved in all societies and historical eras. Evdokimov (2004, p.133) wrote that Saint Ecumenius referred to "Emperors due the domination over our passions, priests for the sacrifice of our bodies, prophets nourished with the teachings of the great mysteries." This is the ideal for a Christian to embody. Saints are used in an endeavor to familiarize the congregation with the qualities of the Kingdom and show how this relates to the individual. Saint Cyril of Alexandria has replaced the Greek dialectics of 'master' to 'slave' with the dialectics in the Gospel of 'father' to 'son.' By adoption, Christians are considered 'all God's children' and thus, equal to Him. Sooner or later, the contemporary person, regardless of how emancipated they consider themselves, they feel the nostalgia for divinity, we have in us the longing for the Absolute, as we are bearers of the divine archetype (Jung, 1997, p. 447), which may be activated in us at any moment, like a volcano which was dormant for too long, by being potent, it has accumulated unknown energies and tensions and in one moment it may become active and we may witness an unprecedented burst of the religious sentiment, of the mystical experience. Although Paul Evdokimov did not succeed in instituting a Christian society as he intended through his efforts to bring everyone to God, he managed to attract the attention of the West and the entire world to the Orthodox East. By proposing a solution to the moral crisis with which the contemporary world is confronted, he managed to illuminate a beacon in the tumultuous 20th century, marked by the two world wars and multiple cataclysms.

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