

# Ecclesial Freedom and Psychological Wholeness: Alexander Schmemmann's Approach to Liturgical Theology

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## I. Introduction: Liturgy And Life

Those intimately familiar with the writings and lectures of Father Alexander Schmemmann will readily admit that he often looked at psychology with a skeptical eye. Nevertheless, one should not hastily conclude that Father Schmemmann was unaware of the psychological dimensions of liturgical worship. One cannot overlook the fact that ecclesial life, culminating in the celebration and reception of the Eucharist, was for Father Schmemmann fundamental to human existence and to the restoration and ongoing transfiguration of the person.

As priest and professor, Father Schmemmann drew attention to the need to re-establish liturgical life as both the sustaining source and culmination of sanctified life. Given his relentless call to restore a healthy liturgical life within the Church, one needs to also bear in mind how this restoration provides the material from which to extrapolate a psychology of the person as well as the psychology of a community and even a nation. As the Church's *theologia prima*, liturgy is both the source of and the context for human freedom and wholeness. From this perspective, one can say that human existence—and by extension human psychology—is moored to the liturgical life, which expresses the Church's vision and ethos.

Because Liturgy is *theologia prima*, it should not be understood as being just one of the various personal and communal expressions of the life in Christ. For Father Schmemmann, liturgy is the manifestation and articulation of the Church's belief, of its *lex credendi*.

Liturgical tradition is not an "authority" or a *locus theologicus*; it is the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of *kerygma*, of the Word of God, because it is in the Church, of which the *leitourgia* is the expression and the life, that the sources of theology are functioning precisely as sources.<sup>1</sup>

As the "expression and life" of the Church, liturgy provides the contours in which spiritual life and therefore human psychology develops. Tragically, however, over the course of history there has been an unraveling of theology and piety from the liturgy. This unraveling or "divorce," as Father Schmemmann calls it, ultimately alienated the laity—that is, the people—from concelebrating with the clergy. Consequently, while the *intellectuals* confined theology to the academy, piety became removed from theology. In the end, both lost their connection to the Church's worship.

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Theology and Liturgical Tradition," in *Worship in Scripture and Tradition*, ed. Massey H. Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 175, quoted in Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Liturgical Press, 1974), xii.



As a theologian, Father Schmemmann understood that theology had to be reintegrated into pastoral care. He was keenly aware of the consequences when theology and life became separated from liturgical worship. A tragic outcome of this disintegration and divorce was a misunderstanding of Orthodox life and thought that, in turn, established liturgy, theology, and life as autonomous entities having no real relationship with one another.

For Father Schmemmann, the reintegration of theology and life was only possible when they were once again restored or moored to the liturgy. Clearly, for Father Schmemmann, the outcome of this restoration would provide the interdependent dynamic necessary for personal and communal wholeness as they are revealed and developed in the context of the Church's worship. One can also argue that the interdependent dynamic of theology, liturgy, and life provides the means by which the Church can cross-examine its *rule of worship* (*lex orandi*) and its *rule of belief* (*lex credendi*), which are too often perceived as being immutable and therefore not subject to restoration or revision.

The goal of liturgical theology, as its very name indicates, is to overcome the fateful divorce between theology, liturgy and piety—a divorce which, as we have already tried to show elsewhere, has had disastrous consequences for theology as for liturgy and piety. It deprived liturgy of its proper understanding by the people, who began to see in it beautiful and mysterious ceremonies in which, while attending them, they take no real part. It deprived theology of its living source and made it into an intellectual exercise for intellectuals. It deprived piety of

its living context and term of reference. . . . To understand liturgy from inside, to discover and experience that “epiphany” of God, world and life which the liturgy contains and communicates, to relate the vision and this power to our own existence, to all one's problems: such is the power of liturgical theology.<sup>2</sup>

From a psychological and therefore spiritual perspective, liturgy, as the expression of the Church's ecclesial life and theology fell into crisis. To all intents and purposes, this crisis has given rise to what can be diagnosed as both *personal* and *corporate* (or, more specifically, *ecclesial*) schizophrenia.

While one may be hard-pressed to find the term schizophrenia in the writings of Father Schmemmann, one cannot overlook how his descriptions of the personal and ecclesial separation from daily life and the world are linked to the ongoing theological and liturgical crisis that have ultimately confirmed the separation of liturgy from life. One cannot overlook the fundamental fact that, for Father Schmemmann, the separation of liturgy from life has given rise to a psychological posture and vision that continues to hinder the Christian from being nurtured by the Church's authentic life.

One may be deeply attached to the “ancient and colorful” rites of Byzantium or Russia, see in them precious relics of a cherished past, be a liturgical “conservative,” and at the same time completely fail to see in them, in the totality of the Church's *leitourgia*, an all embracing vision of life, a power meant to judge, inform and transform the whole of existence, a “philosophy of life” shaping and challenging all our ideas, attitudes and actions. As in

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1974), 12. See also David Fagerberg, “What is the Subject Matter of Liturgical Theology?” *Roczniki Liturgiczno-Homiletyczne* (2010), [http://www.kul.pl/files/926/public/RLH\\_2010/RLH\\_2010\\_art/RLH\\_2010\\_Fagerberg.pdf](http://www.kul.pl/files/926/public/RLH_2010/RLH_2010_art/RLH_2010_Fagerberg.pdf)

the case of theology, one can speak of an alienation of liturgy from life, be it from the life of the Church, or the life of the Christian individual. Liturgy is confined to the temple, but beyond its sacred enclave it has no impact, no power.<sup>3</sup>

Life inside and outside the temple becomes two separate realities that never intersect. Each becomes confined within its own realm, protected by a psychological wall intended to preserve a fictionalized sense of reality that ultimately polarizes God and the world. This schizophrenia gives rise to isolated realities resulting in a separation and antagonism of the uncreated and the created, the spiritual and the material, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world. Behind their respective psychological walls, the realms of the sacred and the profane continue to maintain their autonomy while at the same time undermining the inherent and fundamental goodness of all creation.

With the confinement of liturgical life to the “temple,” the new life in Christ given through water and nurtured by the Spirit and the Eucharist loses its inherent meaning. Consequently, the putting off of the old life that is wed to death and sin and the putting on of the new life—the putting on of Christ and the entrance into his living body, the Church—are no longer associated with the reintegration, wholeness, and freedom of the person (Col. 3:5–17; Eph. 4:22–24; Gal. 3:27). The triune sacraments of baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist, as the participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and upon which the wholeness and freedom of the person depend (Rom. 6:1–14), are lost to new and distorted meanings that are upheld as the authentic tradition of the Church.

## II. Liturgy and Freedom

Human freedom is at the core of Christian life for Father Schmemmann. Yet he was well aware of the complexities and nuances related to freedom that have impacted its understanding and implementation within the life of the Church. Consequently, while he acknowledged freedom as an ecclesial phenomenon, he also realized that within the ecclesial context human freedom could also become compromised. To a large extent, he saw this compromise or distortion as a reduction of freedom to concepts and theories stemming from the polemics between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and how each understood authority.<sup>4</sup>

For Father Schmemmann, the question of human freedom raised during the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation was either in conflict with authority or an expression of individual autonomy. Yet, regardless of how freedom was expressed, ultimately it could only be defined in relationship to authority.

And whether this freedom is defined as freedom *from* (power, control, guidance, authoritative pronouncements) or a freedom *to* (express oneself, theologize, act, etc.) it still remains dependent on, and ultimately subordinated to, the concept and definition of authority.<sup>5</sup>

Father Schmemmann understood the dependence of freedom on authority as a distortion of freedom, a distortion that could either prioritize the community over the person or the person over the community. He recognized that the debates and polemics concerning ecclesial versus personal or individual authority helped to de-

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1979), 131.

<sup>4</sup> See Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission*, 183–5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

personalize the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Holy Spirit became a de-personalized mechanism or objective criterion for authority that, in Father Schmemmann's analysis, disrupted the creative dynamic between the divine and human persons. He quotes from Aleksey Stepanovich Khomyakov's "On the Western Confessions of Faith":

The Church inspired by God became, for the Western Christian, something external, a kind of negative authority, a kind of material authority. It turned man into its slave, and as a result acquired, in him, a judge.<sup>6</sup>

Liturgy as the context and epiphany of ecclesial and personal freedom could also become the means to instill a communal and personal psychological enslavement. This is especially the case when freedom is reduced to a political concept that uses the liturgy to galvanize a group or even a nation to act collectively in favor of or against that which is perceived as either upholding or destabilizing the status quo. More will be said about this shortly.

While the political and social aspects of freedom cannot be ignored or marginalized by the Church, it was the liturgy, and particularly the consecration of the Eucharist by clergy and laity, that provided the basis upon which Schmemmann understood freedom to originate within the communion of persons. As a reflection of the interpersonal communion within the Trinity, the eucharistic rite was intended to celebrate interpersonal relationships transcending time and space. History and eschatology were interwoven and placed beneath the headship of Christ (Eph. 1:8-10). As

a personal and social phenomenon, liturgy for Father Schmemmann was a synergistic act of the divine and the human, by which the future restoration of creation—the eschaton—was inaugurated in the historical present. Within this inaugurated eschaton, all divisions and all polarities were in the process of being overcome within Christ, who “is all and in all” (Col. 3:11). Within this inaugurated eschaton, creation was again being revealed as *sacrament*, that is, as the very material and food for communion with God.

Given his insistence on the cosmic dimension of liturgy and its manifestation of God's inaugurated kingdom, Father Schmemmann was keenly aware of how worship could be manipulated to promote political and nationalistic ideologies that usurped the gospel. He described the thrust of this usurpation as a *unity from below* that propagates a political and national chauvinism. Rather than being perceived as the means to heal the creation by drawing everyone and everything into the reality of God's kingdom, *unity from below* uses liturgy as a weapon to divide, repress, and even persecute those perceived by the political establishment as a threat to the regime, culture and prevailing religion. This is especially apparent in hymnography of the Constantinian and post-Constantinian Church that calls upon God to protect and grant victory to the Orthodox over their political and theological adversaries. To date no official revision or excising of such texts has been attempted.

When liturgy is distorted—when it seeks to promote an ideology and not the gospel—there is no freedom and there is no life. Father Schmemmann speaks of this *unity from below* as being

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 183.



promoted by manipulating the liturgy. He understood the outcome of this manipulation as instilling within the personal and ecclesial psyche the idea that the other is both alien and enemy.

To the degree that [unity] ceases to be unity with God and in God and is transformed into an end in itself and an idol, it becomes not only “easily transformable,” unstable and easily shattered, but also the generator of every new division, evil, violence and hatred. . . . This *unity from below* begins to divide in the same measure that it unifies. Love for one’s own, unity among one’s own, revolves around enmity toward the “foreign,” what is not one’s own, and separation from it, so that unity itself proves to be above all a type of chauvinism, self affirmation and self-defense *against* something or someone. . . . And nowhere does this truly diabolical essence of substitution become more apparent than in those *utopias of unity* that constitute the content and inner motivation of all contemporary *ideologies* without exception, both “left” and “right” —ideologies in which the diabolical lie [false unity, unity from below] sells itself as the ultimate dehumanization of man, as the offering of man as a sacrifice to the “unity” that has become a complete idol.<sup>7</sup>

Among the spiritual and psychological disorders emerging from this description of false unity is paranoia. When the other is perceived as alien and enemy, there is implanted within the ecclesial and personal psyche an attitude that instills either an elitist sectarianism, leading to social withdrawal, or an aggressive activism that seeks to establish a worldly utopia maintained by propaganda, coercion, and violence.

Both sectarianism and activism are driven by ignorance and fear, the products of an ecclesial institution that consciously or unconsciously loses trust in the creative interaction and interpenetration of Spirit, person, and community. With the loss of this creative dynamic, both the ecclesial and the personal psyche become oriented to a distorted image of the past that, in the case of the Orthodox, idolizes and advocates a return to either a Byzantine or a Slavic model of *symphonia*, that is, the interrelationship and interdependency of church and state. For Father Schmemmann, being oriented only to the past ultimately deprived the Church from discerning its historical sojourn through the lens of its eschatological vision. Consequently, the Church refuses to utilize modern and postmodern culture to proclaim the gospel while it attacks the culture as being essentially opposed to the gospel.

*Unity from below* reduces liturgy, including the celebration of the Eucharist, to a political and ideological tool and weapon. When dependent upon a political regime, the beauty of the liturgy is transformed into a spectacle of worldly power that disfigures the very face and person of Christ and consequently the very image and likeness of the human person. God is no longer the standard of personhood, and is replaced by ideology couched in the language of the gospel.

### III. Ecclesial and Personal Freedom

To recover ecclesial and personal freedom, to see and experience them as the expressions of communal and personal wholeness, is a formidable task that needs to transcend authority as that which exists outside and above the life of the Church. For Father

<sup>7</sup>Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1987), 153. My emphasis.

Schmemmann, authority as an exterior force or rule is transcended in and through the communion of persons.

Freedom . . . is not a “part,” an element within the Church coexisting with and related to another element—authority. The Church, being the presence, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, is that reality in which the very dichotomy of authority and freedom is abolished, or rather, is constantly transcended and overcome, and this constant victory is the very life of the Church, the victory of *communion* over alienation and externality. But—and this is very important—the Church is freedom precisely because she is total obedience to God. This obedience, however, is not the fruit of a surrender of freedom to an ultimate and ultimately “objective” authority, acknowledged finally as invincible and unshakable, as indeed the “end” of freedom. It is, paradoxically as it may sound, the fulfillment of freedom.<sup>8</sup>

By stressing *obedience to God*, Father Schmemmann is careful to note that, for the dichotomy of authority and freedom to be overcome, there cannot be a submission to an impersonal or “objective authority.” Succumbing to an impersonal standard depersonalizes God and precludes the creative dynamic of love between the divine and human. In other terms, *obedience to God* is possible only when the dynamic of love between the divine and the human is ongoing. For Father Schmemmann, obedience is built on a relationship of mutual love, trust, and respect of persons, and not on tyranny. From an ecclesial and personal perspective, once obedience capitulates to tyranny, the outcome is twofold. On the one hand, once the Church submits to any authority

or ideology outside and above itself, its gospel becomes diminished and exploited. On the other hand, once ecclesial freedom has been supplanted, the wholeness of the person becomes destabilized. It is no longer derived from and sustained within the context of a personal communion between God, neighbor, and self. The standard of wholeness shifts from the communion of persons to an imposed standard or ethos—often driven by a *Realpolitik*—that in the final analysis can only divide, judge, and condemn.

#### IV. The Calling Down of the Spirit

By no means should Father Schmemmann’s personalization of Truth as the foundation of freedom be equated with intellectual or emotional relativism. Truth and freedom are inextricably bound to the Holy Spirit.

For the Truth, whose knowledge, according to the Gospel, makes us free, is certainly not an “objective truth,” certainly not an “authority”—for in this case the whole dialectic of freedom would again and inescapably be set in its hopeless motion. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit, for it is this presence alone which creates the “organ” of Truth in us and thus transforms the Truth as “object” into “subject.”<sup>9</sup>

Because Christ is the Truth, revealed in and through the Spirit, it can be deduced that the intellect is ever expanding as the emotions continue to develop. The acquisition of the Holy Spirit is an ongoing liturgical *epiklēsis* that permeates every aspect of ecclesial and personal existence. Through the acquiring of the Spirit, every facet of the intellect and emotions is opened to ceaseless creativity, expansion, and transformation.

<sup>8</sup> Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission*, 189.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

Ecclesial freedom allows the Church to transform and transcend every ideology, every ethical and political system, and every philosophy, so as to proclaim the gospel faithfully. It enables the Church to transform the world by transforming the mind and heart of each person seeking salvation and knowledge of the Truth (1 Tim 2:4). But if the freedom of the Church and the wholeness of the person is to be a living reality—if the Spirit is to be continuously active corporately and personally—then there needs to be a reassessment of how the Church sees itself in relationship to the world.

In his journal entry for Wednesday, March 13, 1974, Father Schmemmann refers to the “sociopolitical totem” that Christianity throughout the world opted to embrace and uphold.<sup>10</sup> He stresses that the acceptance and propagation of this totem was the Church’s rebellion against itself that “formed and sanctioned” a “religion” void of joy and life. Consequently, ecclesial freedom and personal wholeness call for a counterrevolution in the form of an inner repentance by which the Church lays down the “sociopolitical totem” and once again raises its one and only “totem”: the cross of Christ, from which “joy has come into all the world.”<sup>11</sup> ☩

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Journal, 1973–1983*, trans. Anne Davidenkoff, Anne Kichilov, and René Marichal (Paris: Editions Des Syrtes, 2009), 114.

<sup>11</sup> Troparion after the Gospel, Sunday Matins.



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