The variability of approaches in the church's identification in the Russian theology of the 20-th century

S. Zelisko

ORCID 0000–0002–3439–0487
Kiev Orthodox Theological Academy

At all times one of the key problems of Orthodox ecclesiology has been the definition of the concept “Church”. Certainly, it reflects a certain theological-ideological paradigm that might change depending on socio-historical circumstances. Such legitimacy is well illustrated by the ecclesiological experience of the Moscow Patriarchate of the 20th century, especially in the 1990s, when Russian Orthodox Church actively acceded to the introduction and spreading of the political and church mythologem as "Russian World" or "Ruskiy Mir" by the leadership of Russian Federation. However, the line allocated to the Church in this project is abhorrent to the concept of the Church of Christ, and therefore, the article is devoted to first and foremost a comparative analysis of various approaches for understanding the Church of Christ and the impact of these approaches on the formation of ecclesiological doctrine and practice of Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the 20th century. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the various approaches to understanding the Church of Christ and the impact of these approaches on the formation of ecclesiological doctrine and practices of Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century. The choice of time and place of the object under study is due to the need to analyze the external and internal influences on the understanding of the phenomenon of the Church of Christ. It was specified that within a short period of time (during the 20-th century), the demolition of several centenaries paternalistic system of mutual influences between the Church and the Russian state took place, and a new system of relations was formed in a wide range – from the persecution and attempts of unequal symbiosis and even to mutual emancipation. Approaches of Russian theologians of the 20’th century as to the concept of the Church should be divided into three groups: conservative (based on the achievements of scholastic theology of the 18’th–19’th centuries), innovative (creative understanding of the patristic heritage, denial of the absolutization of social moment in the Church) and modernistic (adaptation of theology to modern society needs, and sometimes it’s considered as a tool for the use of the Church, or for its destruction). The criteria for their intrinsic definition were the method of definition (e.g, the concept of love) and the connotation associated with their perception (positive or negative). It should also be noted that the "The Foundations of Social Concept of Russian Orthodox Church" adopted by the Moscow Patriarchate in 2000 are in full compliance with the provisions established in the works of the pioneers of the 20'th century. The ideas of the documents remain relevant in the 21'st century, but they appear to undergo new transformations in the future. First of all, we have to take into consideration the current trends in the development of Russian society.

Keywords: ecclesiology; theanthropism; love; Eucharist; Kingdom of God; conservatism; novelty; modernism.
Introduction

Recently, almost everyone can see the results of the increasing aggressive policy of the Russian Federation, one of the main activities of which is the introduction of the myth “Russian World” or “Ruskiy Mir”. One of the leading roles in this project is played by the Russian Orthodox Church, but such a role, which has been assigned by the creators of this geopolitical project to the mentioned Church, is far repugnant to the concept of the Church of Christ. Thus, it is necessary to understand how the Russian Orthodox Church defines the idea of the “Church” as a whole. For a more precise explanation of this idea, the period when the most intensive transformation of the definition of the “Church” occurred and the document “The Foundations of the Social Concept of the ROC”, adopted in 2000, had become the essence of it.

A certain number of relevant microworks are devoted to this topic. The general problematic of the transformation of the Church’s consciousness was defined by the modern Ukrainian theologian Archimandrite Kyrilo (Hovorun, 2015) in his book “Meta-ecclesiology: Chronicles on Church Awareness”. Much work had already been done directly in the analysis of the ecclesiological views of Russian theologians by prof. Lev Shaposhnikov (2006a), however, in his major work, he skipped some key theologians, most notably researchers who worked outside Russia. But to some extent this gap was supplemented in his work about the ecclesiology of archpriest Alexander Schmemann and John Meyendorf (Shaposhnikov, 2008). Somewhat deeper, he analyzed the views of archpriest Nikolay Anfasyey (Shaposhnikov, 2006b), as the founder of Euchariistic Ecclesiology. The scientific work of hieromonk Joseph (Zelisko, 2019) is devoted to the subjects of defining the term “Church” via the term “community”. Also, Anastasia Babayeva (2003) dealt with this topic of the formation of the social doctrine of the ROC. General analysis of ideological trends in Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century (conservative, modernist, fundamentalist) are analyzed in the articles of Andrey Rogozianskiy (2008a; 2008b; 2008c). Various ideologies, or as the author calls them, certain types of religious life on the example of the ROC are contemplated by Maria Skobtsova (2010).

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the various approaches to understanding the Church of Christ and the impact of these approaches on the formation of ecclesiological doctrine and practices of Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century. The choice of time and place of the object under study is due to the need to analyze the external and internal influences on the understanding of the phenomenon of the Churczce of Christ. It was in the 20th century in Russia that, over a short period of time, the disassembling of several hundred years of paternalistic system of mutual influence of the Church and the State occurred, and, at the same time in that period new systems of relations were forming, which fundamentally had both the persecution and attempts of unequal symbiosis, and greater or less mutual emancipation.

Materials and methods

Along with the further spreading of extremely scholastic views on the essence of the Church, the main peculiarity of the 20th century appeared to be the number of theological and philosophical works that referred to the ontological approach basing on the Holy Father’s paradigm. During the 20th century, several major approaches have crystallized in the process of deconstructing of a limited approach to the Church as a community of people (Zelisko, 2019). They can be defined as conservatism, novelty and modernism. The conservative line of theology became a reference point for all other trends in Russian theology of the 20th century. And the criticism of conservative items had shaped two other lines in Orthodox ecclesiology – novelty and modernism. For better understanding of their relationships, firstly, it is necessary to consider conservatism more deeply.

The conservative line of the early 20th century’s ecclesiology was admitted first of all by that it held fast to the positions being formed in the scholastic theology. Conservatives or orthodoxes tried to explain the essence of the Church that had been based on the concept of “community” (community of believers). They treated the Church as a quasi-state system and looked upon it as a group of people united by certain worldviews, discipline, ground rules and “canon”. In other words, they used a legal approach. In case Church is not something completely exceptional, but it belongs to a set of social formations in the state or states. But this approach describes only the way we relate with the world around us and does not explain us nature of Church. The foundations of this approach were formed on the basis of the scholastic outlines of Western Christianity, and Protestantism was above all (Härtel, 1970).

After the Emperor Peter I had imposed the paradigm of caesaropapism in the system of relations between Church and State in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church took this as a norm for its internal life, as a modus vivendi for the Church namely, and, hence, the understanding of its nature. That is why orthodox conservatives are for the definition of the Church as a particular community of people. The main theologians who have introduced this approach into Russian theology are the metropolite Platon (Levshin, 1913) (1737-1812), metropolitan Makariy (Macarius) (Bulgakov, 1883) (1816-1892), metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov, 1886) (1783-1867). Although the aforementioned orthodox conservative theologians did not live in the 20th century, the conservative line of the theologians relied on their works. The main feature was that these 20th century orthodox conservatives of various aspects had not generated anything substantial, they only appealed to the ideas and methods of the theologians of the 18-19 centuries.

In this context, it’s proved by the professors and tutors of spiritual schools in their using the works of the abovementioned “conservatives” throughout the 20th century as the exclusive source of their textbooks and textbooks. Intrinsically such unoriginality cannot go beyond simple compilation. So, in this case adherents (zealots) can be considered as a separate kind of conservatives. They are characterized by a simplified interpretation of the faith confession under the circumstances of the Church’s persecution. The essence of such adherence is anti-modernity or tradition. Namely, they did not originate the
theological works concerning the nature of the Church, defining themselves only to church-political ones (Snychev, 1996). Some researchers also define an additional group among conservatives, which is called as fundamentalism (Rozgiansky, 2008a), but, as Martin Marty (1988) points out, fundamentalism is not a part of conservatism or traditionalism. Mainly it contradicts them both, appealing to certain basic forms of historical Christianity.

Results and discussion

The definition of the Church suggested by conservative theologians through the notion of “community” has been traced not only in conservative circles, but also among novators and modernists. Although most theologians of the 20th century denied the Church’s understanding through the concept “community”, but some researchers, especially such famous theologians as St. Hilarion (Troitskiy 1912) (early 20th century) and Alexander Borisov (1997) (late 20th century) after having rethought it, kept using this concept. The archpriest Evgenii Akvilonov (1894), theologians Nikolai Afanasyev and Alexander Shmeman (1996; 2009) strongly opposed to this understanding of the nature of the Church. Criticizing the scholastic formulation of the nature of the Church through the notion of community, these theologians suggested paying attention to the more essential aspects of the Church’s being. Particularly, following the thinker and theologian of the 19th century Aleksey Khomyakov, they had turned back from the legal understanding of the Church to the ontological one, and subsequently formulated the basic lines with the help of which they were trying to describe the Church, being emmanent on its nature.

Basing on the definition of prof. Lev Shaposhnikov (2006b), according to whom the theological novelty is the development of fundamental abiding principles of Revelation, the following ways of understanding the nature of the Church can be seen which belong to innovation. First of all, many theologians refer to the definition of the Church as the Christ’s Flesh as we can find in the epistles of Ap. Paul (Eph. 1:22-23; Eph. 4:12; Rom. 12:5; Col. 1:18, 24). Starting from the work of archpriest Evgenii Akvilonov (1894), this definition begins to appear more or less emphasized among the most prominent Russian theologians of the 20th century. However, on this aspect of the nature of the Church prot. Vladimir (later known as St. Hilarion (Troitskiy 1912), the priest Pavel Florensky (1914) concentrated in their works, as well as the representatives of the “Paris school” Vladimir Lossky (2012) and Pavel Evdokimov (2012). Particularly important is the fact that in the “The Basis of the Social Concept” of the ROC (The Russian Orthodox Church 2020) the formulation of the concept of the Church as the Flesh of Christ is indicated in the first paragraph with a literal citation of the Ap. Paul’s Epistle to Ephesians.

Even more often in the writings of the 20th century theologians such an aspect of the Church as the effective presence of the Holy Spirit inside Church is taken into account. This issue is studied by theologians of the early 20th century (archpriest Evgenii Akvilonov (1894), hieromartyr Hilarion (Troitskiy 1912), prot. Sergei Bulgakov (1925)), as well as by theologians of the second half of the 20th century (prot. Nikolai Afanasyev (2010), Pavel Evdokimov (2012), prot. John Meyendorff (1997), prot. Alexander Shmeman (2009)). Particular attention should be paid to the priest Nikolai Afanasyev’s achievements, whose ideas became the starting point for the development of one of the lingua franca or fundamentals of the 20th to 21st centuries, – the eucharistic ecclesiology (Govorun, 2018). This approach is also stated in “The Basis of the Social Concept” of ROC. In addition to the remark that Holy Church is considered to be the Christ’s Flesh, thus it is pointed out that Holy Spirit is acting inside Holy Church (§1.1).

Besides the emphasizing on the real presence of Holy Spirit in Church, Russian theologians had also formulated the concept of the Church in combining this aspect with Jesus Christ’s presence in the Church. This approach was used in the works written by Evgenii Akvilonov (1894), archbishop Hilarion (Troitskiy, 1912), prot. Sergey Bulgakov (1925) and Vladimir Lossky (1944). Also, some Russian theologians of the 20th century paid special attention to the active participation of both God and Man in the Church, namely the “divine-humanity” of the Church. The essence of this thought is that Church is two-natural or dyophysitical. It combines two natures and two wills – divine and human. But this “dyophysitism” or “divine-humanity” of the Church is different from the divine human nature of Jesus Christ, because the human component (flesh) in Church is not perfect. It is perfectly only willingly through the union of the Holy Spirit with God. Firstly, Vladimir Lossy, prot. Evgenii Akvilonov and priests Pavel Florensky (1914), Pavel Evdokimov (2012) can be called supporters of this view in the 20th century. The same viewpoint is also recorded in the “The Basis of the Social Concept” of ROC (§1.2).

In the 20th century in the Russian theology the ideas of the Eucharistic centrality of ecclesiology became widely spread, which had been suggested by the famous theologian Henri-Mari Sonier de Lubac (1953). His output subsequently influenced the works of John Romanides and metropolitan Kallistos Ware, but the greatest development of this line can be seen in the writings of prot. Nikolay Afanasyev (1934). A bit different emphasis of the Eucharistic ecclesiology can be found in the writings of prot. Alexander Shmeman (1996) and John Meyendorff (1997) – they no longer focus on the Eucharist community, but on the Eucharist as such. Love is perhaps the most vivid ontological concept of the Church’s being. For the majority of theologians, love acts as a principle that unites members of the Church into a single Flesh of Christ for communion with the Triune God. In the Russian theological tradition, prof. Alexander Belyaev (1880) was the first who focused his attention on the notion of Love as the principle of the Church’s being in the late 19th century. He was probably a supporter of Slavophile ecclesiology. In the 20th century prot. Vladimir Troitskiy (1912), prot. Nikolai Afanasyev (2015) and Pavel Evdokimov (2012) concentrated their attention onto the notion of love in the definition of the Church.

Modernism has become the third approach to the formulation of the concept of the Church. This “new religiosity” was of the essence in it and generally there was a tendency to rationalization, – “faith via mind”. History, human relationships were treated psychologically and pragmatically, outside the scope of spiritual influences. In fact, the religious part of their views was mostly expressed by the doctrine about sacred gifts of the Holy Spirit. Then, very often modernists proceed from the Church’s social
needs and tasks and, therefore, they focus on the concept of community, in particular eucharistial. This can be seen in the writings of prot. Alexander Borisov (1994) and Georgii Kochetkov (1999) in the late 20th century, and prot. Nikolay Afanasiev is considered to be their ideological mastermind (inspirer). One more feature of them is their definition of the Church as a community (renovationists of the 1920’s as a priest Alexander Borisov (1997)), as they fully rely on the definition of 19th century conservative theologians. One of the main features of the modernistic trend in defining the Church is their appeal to the image of the Kingdom of God. Prot. Pavel Svetlov (1905) was the first in the 20th century who elaborated the question of defining the Church as the Kingdom of God in his work. The peculiarity of his approach was his deep integration of social motives. He had tried to move away from the Augustan radical opposed ideas of civitas Dei (Church) and civitas terrena (earthen human formations).

This way the thesis "indifferent attitude to earthly life" finds its niche in the Russian theology. Though such a new view runs up against a lot of opposition among theologians of that time (George, 1906; Sobolev, 1997; Tareev, 1908). It is this tendency to mix the secular and the spiritual that has been picked up by followers of leftist ideologies. Among them can be called, for example, 20s “renovationists” of the 20th century (prot. Alexander Vvedensky (Levitin-Krasnov & Shavrov, 1996), the author of the decrees of the renovational Church Council, in 1923) or the theologians-modernists of the 60s of the same century as prof. Nikolai Zabolotsky (1969) and prof. Liveriy Voronov (1963). The modernists understanding of the Church via the Concept of Love was a bit lapsided. Unlike the innovators who understood love more as the ontological principle of the Church’s existence, modernists who were under the pressure of the communist regime, such as prot. Liveriy Voronov (1991), used the Concept of Love as an attribute of the Church. This was very helpful in carrying out ecumenical and peacekeeping activities.

**Conclusions**

As might be notices, among the theologians’ approaches to defining the concept of the Church, there is a fairly clear tendency to divide into three main categories as conservatism, novelty, and modernism. The criteria for their intrinsic meaning were the means of definition of concepts as (e.g., the concept of the Body of Christ, love, active presence of the Holy Spirit in Church, etc.) and the connotation associated with their perception (positive or negative). So, one term (e.g. “community”) is used in all trends, although it is assessed as positive by some theologians, while others regard them as negative. Conservatism, in its active or passive scopes, turned out in the Russian theological thought in both the 19th and the 20th centuries. In this research for the studied conservative trend in ecclesiology, the only medium for defining the Church was the concept of community. Due to the specific formation of Russian theology in the 19-19 centuries (closely bonds to state ideology), 20th century conservatives do not focus on the inner spiritual nature of the Church existence. They rethink it more through the prism of interaction with the outside world, in particular society and official authorities. Thus, the tradition is the prevalent factor in their theological writings and they are suspicious and biased about various philosophical formations or constructions. Quasi-religious terms and simulacra as “Holy Rus”, “Third Rome”, “Russian Mir” were developed among the conservatives and only this trend deals not only with theology, but also with issues of social and political life.

Novators make up the second category in the 20th century. Unlike the conservative trend, innovators are concerned with theology and theological reflection of the actual challenges of society via spirituality. Proponents of novelty, as well as conservatives, tend to rely on tradition to some extent. If for conservatives, tradition is something complete, fully formulated, then for innovators, tradition is a theological thought or idea that keeps on evolving being based on the unchanging fundamental principles of Revelation. The following outstanding theologians as Alexander Khomyakov (who was considered to be the founder of novelty of the 19th century), Evgenii Avkilonov (1894), archbishop Hilarion (Troitskii 1912), priests Paul Floreskyn (1914), Nikolay Afanasiev, prof. Vladimir Lossky (1944), prof. George Florovsky, John Meyendorf and Alexander Schmemann can be called the supporters of the innovative approach. Also, “The Basis of the Social Concept” of Russian Orthodox Church could be considered as innovative, because of the fact that ideas and views of these theologians were included in it. If conservatism is characterized by a negative attitude to philosophical formations, then in case of novelty it is the opposite. Novelty, on the one hand, resorts to them, based on the other – not so much as to be turned into a philosophical doctrine. The latter is more typical for modernism.

While characterizing their attitude to the Traditions, the innovators are more creative. The works of foreign Russian authors are very illustrative. Prot. Nikolai Afanasiev had created a new “Eucharistic ecclesiology”, based on the works of Saint priest-martyr Ignatius of Antioch. Prot. Georgiy Florovsky, proclaiming the slogan “go forward to Holy Fathers”, substantiated the “neopatristic synthesis”. Prot. Alexander Schmemann reveals Divine Liturgy as the Sacrament of the Church, the Sacrament of the Kingdom. The innovators define the Church via the notion of the Flesh of Christ, the real presence of the Holy Spirit in Church, the Jesus Christ’s presence in Church, the Church’s dynamics, the Eucharistic centrity of the Church, the Concept of Love. They are characterized by a negative attitude towards the definition of the Church via the concept of community and the image of the Kingdom of God. The concept of community among innovators in a positive sense is still used by hieromartyr Hilarion Troitskii (1912), but his definition is largely complementary to what is already commonly accepted term in the beginning of 20th century.

Summarizing the achievements of innovators, it’s necessary to pay attention to a certain trend. Those who worked within Russaia (imperial, totalitarian) suffered repression from both the state and the official church hierarchy. In particular, Alexey Khomyakov was denied in printing of his works in Russia (Firstly published 34 years later after his death). Prot. Evgeniy Avkilonov (1894) was forced to revise his dissertation in order to be able to defend it. Hieromartyr Hilarion (Troitskii 1912) and priest Pavel Floreskyn (1914) were killed in Soviet concentration camps.

Volume 38, Number 2, 2020
At the same time, those of the diaspora theologians made an important contribution to Orthodox theology and influenced the theology of other Churches. It’s about prot. Nikolay Afanasyev, prot. Georgiy Florovsky, prot. Alexander Schmemann and prot. John Meyendorf.

As can be seen from the definition of the term Church and its role in any society, modernist ideas come to the fore when the state confronts the Church or tries to use the Church in its needs. Modernism, as a centrifugal phenomenon in the church theology itself, tends to be destructive, and therefore during the 20th century has been serving as a tool for the use of the Church or for its destruction. Adopted at the Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000, the document " The Foundations of the Social Concept of the ROC" is fully consistent with the conceptions recorded in the works of innovators of the 20th century. These provisions remain relevant in the 21st century, but they appear to undergo new transformations in future, in particular referring to current trends in the development of Russian society and authorities.

References


Akvilonov, E.P. (1894). Church. The scientific definitions of the church and the apostolic doctrine of it as the body of Christ. St. Petersburg: Typography A. Katanskogo i K.


Belyaev, A.D. (1880). Divine Love. The experience of revealing the most important Christian dogmas from the beginning of God’s love. Moscow: Typography L.F. Snegireva.


George, [Bishop.] (1906). Where are the causes of the decline of the theological school? A few comments on the charges of prof. O.P. Svetlov, a learned monk in the decline of a spiritual school. Faith and Church, 8 (6–7), 199–211.


