



## BOOK REVIEW

# Reactualisation of Triadology in Polemics with Postmetaphysics

**Review of Oleg Davydov (2020). *Revelation of Love: Trinitarian Truth of Being*.  
St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute**

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The book *Revelation of Love: Trinitarian Truth of Being* is a monograph written by the Russian thinker Oleg Davydov and published by St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute in 2020. While working on the book, the author was engaged in research activities at the institutes in the Far Eastern Russian cities Khabarovsk and Vladivostok; at the time of publication, he was a Professor at the Department of Theology of the Moscow Theological Academy.

The monograph presents an original project, which is significant both for contemporary Russian theology and Christian philosophy generally. First and foremost, the scale of the project is impressive as the author sets out to develop a fundamental Christian apologetics for the modern world, which ranges from the mediaeval metaphysics up to the contemporary postmodern philosophy. Moreover, the author abandoned traditional style of theological discourse and produced a work of a synthetic genre, which combines a scientific monograph with a polemical treatise, a manifesto, and it also includes lengthy metaphoric digressions.

In his attempt to justify the truth of the Christian understanding of reality, the author compares a very wide range of theological and philosophical doctrines with modern and contemporary theories. His approach is mainly critical as the author aims to show the inconsistencies in the dominant philosophical paradigms of our time and reveal the flaws in various modern and postmodern theological projects. It is in this polemical context that the monograph addresses the main issue of Christian theology—the relation of God to the creation. Consequently, it also discusses the nature of knowledge and the possibility of communication with God.

Received 30 July 2021

Accepted 16 December 2021

Published online 30 December 2021

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Davydov rebukes contemporary Christian thinkers for having abandoned their “ontological responsibility”, which, in his opinion, resulted in the degradation of Christian thought. Christian theology turned into “all too human” historical and philological criticism, anthropological hermeneutics, and sentimental moralising (p. XV). Although such a radical rejection of the “human” might resemble the theocentric turn in 20<sup>th</sup> century European Protestant theology, Davydov’s criticism has different motivations. The author is inspired by David Bentley Hart and Hans Urs von Balthasar, but he also draws from Gregory of Nyssa and Bonaventure. While the radical orthodoxy movement is considered separately, Davydov traces its origins to the works of von Balthasar, Karl Barth and others. Although radical orthodoxy is not a new trend in theological thought, Davydov’s presentation clarifies a number of significant issues and, more importantly, brings a truly fresh stream of thinking into contemporary Russian theology.

Structurally, the book consists of an introduction and fourteen chapters. While admitting that his intention to follow “the path of faith seeking understanding” (p. XXI) precludes systematic exposition, Davydov unfolds his argument in a clearly visible logic. In the first chapters, the author lays down his principles and outlines structural framework for his entire book. Here, along with the central theme—apologetics of Trinitarian Revelation, the analogy of being is set forth as a methodological principle. The subsequent chapters analyse the ways the Trinity operates and manifests itself in the life of the created world with the help of such transcendentals as beauty, truth, and goodness. The last chapters—“variations on a common Trinitarian theme” (p. XXI), in the author’s definition,—discuss Christology, pneumatology, kenosis, and eschatology. While developing the central theme, these chapters can be read as independent pieces. The book in its entirety summarizes major Christian themes and presents them from the critical perspective of postmodern metaphysics. In what follows, we will limit our consideration to the central ideas and main argument of the book.

The first chapter “Genesis and Revelation” begins with a criticism of post-metaphysics. It is blamed by Davydov for emasculating rational comprehension of reality because it eliminated such ideas as “God” and “Truth”. In the same chapter, in order to explicate the main characteristics of the Trinitarian Revelation, the author distinguishes the revelatory knowledge of God the Trinity from the emanative-metaphysical knowledge. Triadological problems are illuminated in a rather multifaceted way, including the Trinity’s relation to creation. The analogy between the unity of intra-Trinitarian relations and the relations of Divine Persons to creation is highlighted as well as the perichoretic nature of the unity of Persons and other important aspects of Christian Triadology are discussed. The analysis is structured around the arguments of major European thinkers such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph S. O’Leary, William Clark, Conor Cunningham as well as Russian religious philosophers Sergei Bulgakov and Paul Evdokimov. It is the acceptance of the Trinitarian Revelation that, according to the author, is the only way to adequately comprehend reality, while (post-) modern epistemology leads away from the true state of affairs.

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A separate paragraph of the first chapter is devoted to the *transcendentals*—ontological predicates of being (truth, beauty and goodness) that reveal being in existence. For Davydov, in reflecting properties of the divine in the created world, the transcendentals represent the connecting element between Creation and Creator. While describing the history of the doctrine of the transcendentals from its beginning in Western scholasticism, the author claims that German idealistic philosophy distorted the objective nature of the transcendentals and traces back to this distortion much of the contemporary transcendentalist tendencies. The author provides a more detailed analysis of the individual transcendentals in the subsequent chapters (5–7).

In the second chapter, the analogy of being is used to express the relationship of the creation to the Creator. A detailed excursus into the development of the idea of *analogia entis* in the Western mediaeval theology is followed by the description of its revival in modern theology. The analogy of being reappears in the works of such Catholic theologians as Erich Przywara and von Balthasar. Davydov also expounds the history of the rejecting the *analogia entis* by both secular (Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida) and religious thinkers (Barth). For Davydov, the method of analogy combines both apophatic (negative) and cataphatic (positive) ways of knowing God, thus accounting for both mystical and rational-empirical capacities of human beings.

The third chapter ('Being and Creation') discusses the creation of the world "from nothing" (*ex nihilo*) and its centrality for the Christian understanding of reality. Thus, despite the apparent autonomy of world's existence, it is inextricably linked with its Creator. The author denounces Heideggerian and other post-metaphysical projects, which deny "ontotheology" by positing being outside of God. Instead, in discussing the relation of the Creator to the Creation, Davydov emphasises both unity and difference: unity is the transmission of Divine being to the creation, while difference is the inexpressibly different ontological modality of God and the world. In the following chapter, a detailed discussion of "post-metaphysical" and "trinitarian" views of reality is presented. Heidegger's ontic-ontological model and other post-metaphysical constructions enforce a separation from God for the sake of autonomous existence, which ultimately lacks a substantive basis. According to a trinitarian view, conversely, a creature can experience his or her difference from God as peaceful and harmonious.

The apologetics for the Trinitarian nature of being (God and—similarly—the world) continues in Chapter 6 where the author focuses on the historical context of reviving trinitarian problematique in the 20<sup>th</sup> century theology. It begins with identifying two (conditional) planes of the existence of God the Trinity—immanent and economic. Davydov discovers origins of this idea in dialectical theology (Barth and Eberhard Jüngel), which were later explicated in Catholic theology by von Balthasar and Karl Rahner. Although it has become a *locus communis* in Western theology, it is necessary to distinguish interpretations of this idea in Eastern and Western theology. Eastern theology presumably has lost the "functional" meaning of the Trinity (especially in Palamism). However, the consensus between the Eastern and Western traditions regarding the correspondence between immanent and economic Trinity is possible, at least in the cognitive aspect. It is possible because

God the Trinity can be known through His economic actions in relation to creation. However, this is only possible if the inner life of God is not determined by *ad extra* divine actions (see, for example: Lavrentiev, 2014; Vletsis, 2009).

In addition, the monograph presents many other aspects of Christian theology, which are comparatively laid out their interpretations in classical and modern philosophical thought. But for reasons of brevity, we now turn to the stylistic form of the book under review.

First of all, a reader will notice the complex syntax of the work: the text is replete with many subordinate clauses and dangling attributes. At the lexical level, terminology is quite unconventional and text abounds in metaphorical phrases: “the immanent plan of possibilist theology” (p. 194), “Nietzschean cadence” (p. 188), “persuasive force”, (p. 319), “postmodernists valorise the systole of apophatic theology, abstracting it from cataphatic diastole” (p. 147). Although the meaning of such words and newly formed combinations is, in principle, comprehensible, it unduly burdens already lengthy and semantically complex text.

Some incorrect uses of terminology in Russian need to be mentioned. For example, the notion of “economy” (in the original Russian text *ikonomia*) and its adjective “economic” (*ikonomisheskiy*) refer in general to the providential and soteriological divine action towards the creation. Instead of this term, which has long been established in Russian theological discourses, the author uses—having in mind the theological meaning—the forms *ekonomia*, *ekonomika* (“economy”, pp. 357, 358, etc.), the phrase *ekonomicheskaya Troitsa* (“economic Trinity”) (see, for example, pp. 37, 59, 336 and etc.). It is not explained and causes confusion, since “economics”, “economy”, and “economic” do not have any theological connotations in the Russian.

Despite these irregularities, the work is a worthy apology for the traditional Christian view of reality, which demonstrates the failure of attempts on the part of modern theologians to switch to the modality of modern discourses (“irreligious Christianity”, “death of God”, etc.).

The author may well be identified as an adept—even a representative—of radical orthodoxy. However, his work does not only reproduce its main postulates or traces its development, it creatively re-interprets the movement in the context of Russian theology and sets it within the framework of established Orthodox patterns of thought. The non-confessional nature of the movement (despite its British-Catholic origin) allows its integration into the Orthodox paradigm, especially since it is traditional common Christian truths that are being defended here. The confessionless—or overconfessional—nature of Davydov’s monograph should also be noted: questions of interconfessional divergences, the search for a true position in some particular Christian confession are left out of the book, which is essentially directed toward a Christian worldview that is independent of historical collisions and misunderstandings<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Although the author clearly does not articulate his confession, nevertheless, by indirect indications, it can be assumed that it is precisely Orthodox: the confession of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed (p. XV) and his position of professor at a higher Orthodox theological school.

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At the same time, it is possible to discern a critical attitude towards the conservative position of the Eastern Christian tradition and sympathy for certain intentions of Western theology in Davydov's work<sup>2</sup>. However, this should be seen as testifying to an attempt to find the best in Western and Eastern Christian thought with the aim of their fruitful synthesis. Perhaps, the author's project is vulnerable to certain narrowly confessional criticisms. For example, on the *filioque*, which is excellently problematised by Davydov in the context of Christian pneumatology: Orthodox and non-Orthodox theologians, of different historical periods and positions, are in the dialogue with each other. However, it is not our task to seek such vulnerabilities. In this regard, I would only like to note that theology involves not a thoughtless repetition of once accepted dogmatic formulations and their fanatical protection, but a living thought arising from personal spiritual experience, and a thinker, who, in daring to think about God and His actions, inevitably faces risks. Nevertheless, without incurring such risks, living knowledge of God is hardly possible.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, p. 139: “vostochno-hristianskaja tradicija, vozmozžno, chrezmerno uvlekshis' konfessionalizmom i apologetikoju” (“[...] the Eastern Christian tradition, perhaps overly carried away by confessionalism and apologetics” et seq.).