



BOOK REVIEW

A Theology of History: In Search of a Method

Review of the book by Priest M. V. Legeyev (2021). *Bogoslovie istorii kak nauka. Metod.* [Theology of history as a science. Method]. Sankt-Peterburgskaia Dukhovnaia Akademiia.

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The monograph *Theology of history as a science. Method* (2021) is the result of the meticulous work of Priest Mikhail Legeyev, an Associate Professor of the Department of Theology at St. Petersburg Theological Academy. The author is already quite well-known to the Russian reader for his writings focusing on the problems of the theology of history (the book under review is the last in the research triptych¹) as well as for his publications on patristics and ecclesiology.

In the monograph under consideration, M. V. Legeyev continues to realize the objective he set in the previous works. Namely, his task is “to form a new direction of scientific and theological thought” (p. 7), which, in his opinion, is the theology of history. The book consists of four chapters. The first two chapters are the programmatic basis of the highlighted problems. Chapters three and four are rather more supplementary in nature although they are closely related to the subject matter of the monograph, which will be discussed later.

Chapter 1 “What is Theology of History Today?” emphasizes the role of the Church as “the connecting link between all historical processes” and defines the theology of history itself as a kind of self-reflection of the Church. Thus, theology of history enters the disciplinary boundaries of ecclesiology, or, in the author’s words, is a “satellite” of ecclesiology (p. 13). It should be immediately noted that M. V. Legeyev follows the traditional orthodox understanding of the Church, which is based on the patristic heritage, the provisions of the first seven Ecumenical Councils as well as the later Eastern Christian tradition. He sees signs of deviation from the foundations of the true Tradition in the historical divisions of Christianity. At the same time, this study does not offer an explicit opposition

¹ In addition to the work under consideration, the following monographs of the author came out: Legeyev M. V. (2018); Legeyev M. V. (2019).

between Eastern and Western ecclesiologies, and the author's task is obviously not the apologetics for the Eastern Christian ecclesiasticism against alternative concepts of the Church (except the intra-Orthodox discussion presented in Chapter 3).

The author discriminates between the field of the theology of history and historical knowledge with its methodology. According to M. V. Legeyev, theology of history belongs to systematic, not historical theology. Dissimilar to historical science, theology of history is focused on comprehending the matrix of *total*, or *universal* history, and not on studying individual historical processes or even "the entire totality of events" (p. 14). Its subject matter is, according to the author, "the pivotal points of history", which have a transcendent source. In this regard, theology of history uses "globally general concepts" [...] it can even discourse on what does not yet exist [...], considering and analyzing the general meanings of historical processes" (p. 17). The author admits that at present there is no developed methodology of the theology of history, but he believes that it should belong to the field of dogmatic theology.

I would like to remind the reader that the problem of opposing the historical method to the dogmatic method in academic theology has existed for over a century. The famous German thinker E. Troeltsch analyzed it most clearly in his short essay *On the Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology* (Troeltsch, 1913) in 1898. In this work Troeltsch, on the one hand, carefully analyzed the difficulties in applying the historical method to theology (relativism and so on). On the other hand, he pointed out the decline in the interest in the "old dogmatic method"². The reason for the latter process, according to Troeltsch, was the rooting of the dogmatic method in beginnings completely disengaged from history.

The problem of the correlation and coexistence of these two methods seems truly fundamental since it is included in the antinomic sphere of the basic problems of theology, namely the correlation of the transcendent and the immanent, the temporal and the eternal, the divine and the human.

First of all, the author of the monograph sets himself the objective of defining the key aspects of the theology of history. These, in his opinion, should be the acting forces (subjects) and the scale of historical processes as well as a range of issues related to identifying the patterns of these processes and their systematization. Drawing on the biblical and patristic thought, the author proposes a classification of the subjects of history. Each subject is a dichotomous unit divided into two antipodes: (a) the Church and the world, (b) secular (worldly) society and church community, (c) secular and church individuals. M. V. Legeyev calls this a "mirror-ternary" classification since there are three different-scale acting subjects of history contrasted at each level (p. 21).

The study emphasizes that the emergence of historical patterns from the earliest stage of Christian thought to the XXth–XXIst centuries was supposed by theologians to depend on "an inner-trinitarian arrangement, in the life of God Himself" (p. 26). In this regard, the author identifies two key trajectories in history: (a) the Revelation of God

² "Ist für den historisch Empfindenden die alte dogmatische Methode ungangbar" (the old dogmatic method turns out to be unsuitable for a person with a sense of history) (Troeltsch, 2013, p. 737). An analysis of the historical and dogmatic methods E. Troeltsch discussed in his essay can be found in the paper by Lavrentiev (2012). Additionally, the same publication provides a further rethinking and elaboration of the methods performed by another major German theologian and a theorist of the modern theology of history.

in history and (b) “the reflection of this image of the trinitarian revelation in the life of man and the Church” (p. 26). It also raises the question about the relationship between the laws of history and man’s free will, which, in M. Legeyev’s opinion, is resolved in the theology of Maximus the Confessor (VII century) with the help of the logoi doctrine. Based on the model of Revelation in history and its reception in the world, the author defines the following key principles of the patterns of historical processes: trinitarian, christological, ecclesiological, and cosmological.

In the conclusion of the first chapter, the author speaks of the “scientific and theological models of history.” The researcher himself mainly develops a *three-stage* model (the shadow of the image, the image, the mystery) in his work. Nevertheless, he also schematically outlines a *sevenfold* model (based on the text of the Book of Revelation of John the Apostle) which, in his view, remains an “unsurpassed paradigm” of scientific and theological history modeling (p. 40).

Chapter 2 of the publication (“Typology of History”) is central in terms of content since it is here that the methodological principle of the theology of history is proposed. As noted previously, the trinitarian and christological modes of God’s action constitute its basis. M.V. Legeyev believes that grasping God’s *modus operandi* makes it possible to understand the logic of historical processes and as a result to model universal history.

It should be noted that modeling the history of creation in the image of inner-trinitarian life is a rather difficult task since the compared ontological dimensions are fundamentally different³. Nevertheless, since the Creator is the source of creation, it is still possible to speak of their connection. From this perspective, the point at issue is, in the first place, the mode of God’s revelation and God’s mode of action in the world (for the author of the monograph, this concept – τρόπος τῆς ἐνέργειας – is one of the core ideas, p. 54). The revelation of the One God in the Old Testament era, the prophecy of Christ and His soteriological action within history, the promised action of the Holy Spirit in the world—all these stages can be traced both in the biblical and in subsequent Christian discourses. It goes without saying the ecclesiastical aspect of history is also relevant here since it is the Church that is the main bearer of the divinely revealed Revelation and the guardian of Tradition. Therefore, it is not surprising that the author of the monograph considers the Church to be the central subject of history.

It is particularly remarkable that to M.V. Legeyev both the modern idea of development (“the process of the development of church dogmatic thought”, p. 32) and the idea of static character inherent in classical theism are equally relevant. According to the latter, history moves along already given transcendental patterns. The researcher combines these ideas defining the “progress of the Church” as a change of epochs, “characterizing its internal maturation” (p. 33). This progress is based on transcendental principles which are prototypes of mundane reality (above all, the reality of the Church, but also, to a certain extent, the reality of the world).

³ Implicitly, the work touches upon the problems of immanent and economic triadology which the author interprets drawing on ancient sources. Nevertheless, he does not demonstrate familiarity with modern discussions on this issue. See, for example, the papers by Olson (1983) and Lavrentiev (2014).

Actually, these ideas set the agenda of the study, namely the search for the *patterns* of history revealed while correlating the historical stages of the Church formation with divine ontological predicates. M.V. Legeyev calls this method of correlation (correspondence) *typological* (derived from ancient Greek τύπος – image). Based on the knowledge obtained from Revelation (the Holy Scriptures and Sacred Tradition), the author believes it is possible to model the course of history. At the same time, the dialectic of the transcendent (the sacred prototype) and its embodiment in the earthly reality (the image), which the researcher calls the “two-trajectory model”, is supplemented by the internal dialectic of the opposition within the framework of the historical process itself, i. e. the opposition of the world to God.

The author’s line of thought regarding the implementation of history modeling (and in this regard, in a sense, forecasting the future) resembles the logic of already well-established historiosophical conceptions. This is classical Christian providentialism, according to which the action of Divine Providence predetermines the course of history. One can also see similarities to the secular concepts of historical determinism which implies rigid causation of the ongoing world processes (from global to individual). As a result, the course of history turns out to be predetermined, regular and, in principle, computable. In both cases, the problem of an individual’s freedom and unpredictability remains unresolved, which destroys the harmony of both theistic and secular historiosophical models of predestination. I consider this issue to be also problematic for the model proposed in the work under review.

According to the researcher, the law-making principles of history are *logoi*, i. e. “the meanings of everything that exists”. They are associated with the hypostatic wills of God (more precisely, the second divine Person of the Holy Trinity) with which “God the Son[...] organizes history” (p. 62). However, the main difficulty lies in the reconciliation of divine wills with the free wills of particular individuals. Basically, M.V. Legeyev (following Augustine of Hippo) names two possible options: either there is an agreement between the human and the divine wills (synergism) or opposition of the former to the latter. In any case, however, the outcome of history is predetermined by its eschatological completion which will summarize the historical existence of mankind in general and of each individual in particular.

The bottom line is that two entities are of interest: God and man. In this context, according to the conception provided in the book, the mode of human existence is realized at different levels, namely individual, social, and universal. This mode can be synergistic (consistent with divine will). In the work reviewed it is also called *ecclesiological* since its implementation takes place in the Church (the image of the Holy Trinity). On the other hand, it can be “*ecclesiofugal*”, i. e. occurring outside the Church and opposed to divine teleology. In general, the typological paradigm of history created by the author really fits into the framework of traditional Christian dogmatic theology (soteriology, asceticism, ecclesiology, and eschatology) while demonstrating a specific systematic elaboration

Chapter 3 (“Ecclesiological Issues of Modernity and the Theology of History”) is an excellently developed and engrossing, but at the same time quite autonomous study focusing on the issues of the existence of the Church and its self-reflection.

Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly related to the problems of the theology of history and in a sense is a further elaboration of one of its aspects, namely the historical nature of churchness.

Chapter 4 (“The Methodological Significance of Tradition in the XXIst Century”) does not focus on the problems of the theology of history directly, but again it rather refers to developments in ecclesiology. According to M. V. Legeyev, “ecclesiology itself will act here [...] to a greater extent as a historical example illustrating the laws of functioning of Tradition as the driving force of history” (p. 204).

The scientific nature of the theology of history, according to the provisions of the reviewed work, consists in finding the *laws*, or *consistent patterns* of history. In the light of revealing and viewing such patterns through the prism of the theological perception of reality, it is indeed possible to speak of an attempt at developing a scientific (albeit purely theoretical) approach to history. However, whether this is sufficient to create a separate discipline within systematic theology (truly systematic, not historical, according to M. V. Legeyev) remains an open question. I believe the emergence of the theology of history as a separate discipline is unlikely on account of the already established architecture of theological knowledge.

It is also worth noting that the theology of history can hardly be called a “new development in scientific and theological thought” as the monograph argues. Moreover, this is true even in the context of the modern theology era. The point is that in Western academic theology this approach has been developed for about two centuries. Strictly speaking, it dates back to F. C. von Baur’s writings. Moreover, it experienced something of a renaissance in the second half of the XXth century in the works by W. Pannenberg, J. Moltmann, J. Daniélou, H. U. von Balthasar and many others. However, this research direction can indeed be considered a new trend in the context of scientific theology in modern Russia. Its relevance and novelty lie, perhaps, not so much in the explication of such already known problematic oppositions as history and dogma, time and eternity, God and creation, transcendence and immanence, but in new perspectives of understanding historicity, i. e. through the prism of the patristic tradition, in the contexts of both the specific features of Eastern ecclesiology and the Russian philosophical and theological tradition.

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