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Metropolitan Platon on natural theology

Metropolitan Platon (1737-1812) was one of the most important ecclesiastical figures in Russia of the second half of the eighteenth century. He was very close to the imperial throne. He was a religion teacher of the prince Paul, a son of the empress Catherine II, then a tutor and confessor of his wife Wilhelmina/Natalia and then of his new wife Sophia/Maria. He assisted in the ceremony of coronation of Paul I and then he conducted the coronation ceremony of Alexander I. He was also a member of the Synod, the highest ecclesiastical body in the Russian church.

The *Instructive speeches*

It has been said that Platon was the most prolific ecclesiastical writer of his times.¹ He left twenty volumes of *Instructive speeches*, seventeen of which are sermons and occasional speeches. Only three of them contain more substantive works including *The Orthodox teaching or abridged Christian theology* (1765) based on lessons given to young Paul I in 1763-1765; the work was very popular and was translated into several languages. Another work, the *Catechism or elementary instruction in the Christian law* (1781), includes public lectures given on Sundays and church holidays in 1757-1758. There are also three *Abridged catechisms*, not much different from one another; *An exhortation to the schismatics* (1766); and a brief *Instruction to the clergy* (1775).² Not included in the *Speeches* are a two-volume *Short history of the Russian church* (1805), Platon's autobiography, and his numerous letters.

The major bulk of Platon's printed works consists of his sermons and speeches. However, publishing sermons and speeches is always a bit dangerous. The

¹ И.М. Снегирев, *Жизнь Московского митрополита Платона*, Москва 1856, vol. 2, p. 90.

² This *Instruction* was "adopted throughout the Empire and was used as a model still in the second half of the following century," K.A. Papmehl, *Metropolitan Platon of Moscow (Petr Leвшin, 1737-1812): The Enlightened Prelate, Scholar and Educator*, Newtonville 1983, p. 55.

significance and impact of a sermon can only be fully appreciated when it is being delivered. Important for its impact is the ambiance of the place, atmosphere of the times, and memory of recent social and political events, not to mention the preacher's way of delivering a sermon, his intonation, body language, etc. most of which is lost in the published format when only a printed word is left.

Most of Platon's sermons concern basic tenets of Christian religion and Christian ethics. Platon preached on the sinfulness of man, the impossibility of freeing oneself of it, and the necessity of turning oneself to Christ for forgiveness; about the mercy and love of God who is ready to accept anyone who comes to Him with a contrite heart; about good works as a sign of the genuine conversion and acceptance of Christ as the Lord of one's life; about turning one's back to the temptations offered by this world and filling one's mind with the thought of death as the transition to the next life, to the union with God; about practicing virtue in all circumstances. All of it is a solid Christian message. However, reading seventeen volumes of sermons with even the most uplifting messages that are repeated over and over again³ have a numbing effect because of this repetitiousness. Sermons, when printed, probably should not be read silently, but out-loud; better yet, they should be listened to while being read by someone else, and not one after another, but maybe one sermon a week. Since Platon left over 600 of them, this would suffice for over a decade.

In his sermons, Platon only occasionally and marginally ventured into any theology. Messages are rather simple, sometimes surprisingly simple considering his audience (the imperial court, monks in monasteries) who should know all of it. This means that Platon considered his sermons to be pep talks, reminders of basic Christian duties to be fulfilled by everyone regardless of their station.⁴ His messages are always backed up by scriptural references that include scriptural quotations and Biblical examples. Seldom did he use other examples, but occasionally he did (recent events, Alexander the Great, and the like). Very infrequently he referred to the church fathers, and almost always it was a reference to Chrysostom.

Sermons are also occasions to show off one's rhetorical skills and Platon did not shun from using some rhetorical devices. He used sequences of sentences with a repeated phrase, for instance, "We saw dying Christ; today, let's look at Him resurrected. We saw Him exhausted; today, let's look at Him actualizing

³ "He could not escape repetitions," as politely phrased by И.М. Снегирев, *Жизнь Московского митрополита Платона*, op.cit., p. 96.

⁴ The opinion expressed by Р.М. Короткевич, *Митрополит Платон и русские императоры (Опыт критического восстановления прошлого)*, in: *Макарьевские чтения 8: Русские государи – покровителя православия*, Можайск 2001, p. 223, that Platon's *Instructive speeches* given in the court are "until this day striking with brilliance and depth of [his] judgments [and] with penetrating assessments," is much too gracious.

blessing and truth; we saw Him humiliated to the level of a slave; today, let's look at Him to whom all heavenly, earthly, and infernal knee is bowing. We saw Him suffering; today, let's look at Him being worshipped," and five more such we-saw/let's-look pairs (PS 19.276).⁵ Quite often he used sequences of rhetorical questions, for instance, God allows attacks of evil spirits since we are destined for eternal life; "where would we win, if there were no battle? Where would you show your courage, if there were no enemy? Where would you deserve a wreath, if you did not overcome a fighter fighting against you? How would you show your endurance, if there were no charms and temptations of the flesh that you would overcome?" and two more such questions (19.348). Such sequences, however, lose their effect on the printed page. Also, he used a somewhat theologically perilous device of speaking as though God or Christ Himself were speaking, for instance, "*The world does not see Me, but you see* [J. 14:19]. Do not grieve, my disciples and all believers, that I allegedly hide my face from you. It cannot be hidden from you. Stop clinging to one perceptible sight common to all living beings. *The flesh does not profit anything* [J. 6:63]. You see yourselves that with these limited eyes hateful Pharisees and evil Jews look at me; My crucifiers also look [at me] like you do," etc. (19.289; cf. an entire sermon in form of an imaginary conversation between Simeon and God, 19.371-380). Obviously, Platon did not see anything wrong in using such rhetorical devices, although he warned against the use of bombastic words that attempt to make truth prettier, since "the face of truth is in itself beautiful" enough and such words may make an impression that "the wizardry of rhetoric" is more convincing than the truth itself (5.171-172). He also said that catechetical teaching should not use beautiful eloquence and rhetorical figures (8.25); can they be used in sermons? Maybe, if catechesis is for the young and for common/simple people (43), and particularly for the lazy and for the simple (52), then eloquence and rhetorical figures would appear to be acceptable for an audience of adult energetic sophisticates.

The existence of God

In his catechetical teaching and to a much lesser extent, in his sermons, Platon offered some rational arguments from natural theology when introducing fundamental truths of Christian religion, beginning with proofs of the existence of God.

⁵ References are made to the following works of Platon: PS – *Поучительные слова*, Москва 1778-1806, vols. 1-20; references are made to sermons and to *Катехизис, или первоначальное наставление в христианском законе, толкованное всенародно*, vol. 8. PU – *Православное учение, или сокращенное христианское Богословие*, in: *Поучительные слова*, vol. 7. The book was translated three times into English: *The present state of the Greek church in Russia*, Edinburgh 1814; *The Orthodox doctrine of the apostolic Eastern church*, London 1857; and in an abbreviated version, *The great catechism of the holy catholic, apostolic and Orthodox church*, London 1867.

According to Platon, “human knowledge begins with knowing oneself”; cf. 1 Cor. 11:31 (PU 1.§1). Self-knowledge teaches that we could not create ourselves; thus, it has to be a Creator, an omnipotent and uncreated God (1.§2). Self-knowledge is thus a starting point of theological investigations conducted by human reason. The Delphic maxim of knowing oneself was also indicated by Dimitrii Rostovskii as the beginning of the search for God. By itself, the argument is not sufficient and Platon discussed other proofs of the existence of God.

Platon did not really make much of the proof of self-knowledge. In a way, an extension of this approach is that nothing gives birth to itself – in particular, I did not create myself; that is, things come from other things (PS 8.141), which is the principle known already to the Presocratics that nothing comes from nothing. According to Platon, even if something existed for a million years, it came from something. An infinite chain of causes cannot exist since “there is no beginning in infinity and if there is no beginning for things which now are in the world, then such things should not experience on themselves any change: that is, [they should not] be born, nor deteriorate, but, without fail, they should be as they have been in infinity. Since infinity does not tolerate any decrement or increment, as, for instance, God: if He now included something in His being, then I could think about Him that there was time when He did not exist; similarly, when I see that now something came into being, then I can conclude that it did not exist. And if I go further, then I’ll see that they all [beings] were born; thus, I should conclude that they did not exist at some point *and not without end*. In such an infinite regress, the first cause will never be found; all of them will be second, third, but never first” (142-143). The proof is rather befuddled. First, being infinite does not mean having no beginning. Second, if something exists without beginning, this does not mean that it cannot be a subject of change. The world of Empedocles, Aristotle, the atomists, and the Stoics was infinite, uncreated, without beginning, and yet it was teeming with change. Platon seems to have equated eternal existence with immutability, which is unjustified. Third, if a being was augmented by including in it something that it did not have before, it does not mean that there must have been a moment when this being did not exist. Even assuming that such augmentation went on eternally, the being could have existed from eternity as well.

The most important thing for every human being is to know God. Platon offered self-knowledge as a starting point, but there is another, more promising way to make such knowledge possible to every person. “It is enough to open eyes to see the Creator and the Ruler of all things” (PS 10.277). There is a book open in the entire universe, the book written in letters understood by all. “A diligent examination of this world” provides one such proof: “the world is like a theater that shows us the glory of God; like a book that proclaims its Creator; like a mirror in which we see creations of the divine wisdom” (PU 1.§3.1; PS 8.144). This is

a classical proof from design used widely in Platon's times by physico-theologians and a proof to which Platon made most frequently a reference. In this, he joined the spirit of the times when physico-theology was very popular also in Russia, to mention only Lomonosov and Trediakovskii.

We see in the world "an ineffable beauty, diversity, order, changes, the sequence and flow of all things for preservation of the whole world" (PS 8.144). The harmoniousness and order permeating the world point to an intelligence that introduced this order. Order cannot come from irrationality. If there is an order, there has to be someone causing this order (221-222). If we read a book, we know that someone wrote it, since the letters could not organize themselves into a meaningful whole. And so the intricate makeup of a tree, and of the human body points to an intelligent creator (145).

The organization of the world points also to the goodness of its Creator and His providential care (PS 8.144). We can find traces of God's love everywhere (6.339). For example, the sun warms up everything, but does not burn (340). Although we may not know what beneficial influence stars have on earth, we can be sure that they with everything else support our being. Seamen use them as guides. Air is used in bellows, in breathing, in cooling the hot body and in warming up the cold body (341). The earth is also wonderfully created with all these animals that can be used for food and to help in our work, with all these flowers, trees, earth's natural resources, etc. (342).

Sometimes it is said that the world arose by accident from a primal chaos of randomly moving particles. In the light of physico-theological proofs, Platon impatiently answered that "this is so silly that it does not even deserve an answer" (PS 8.143).

Another proof is provided by the agreement of all nations, a universal recognition of the existence of the divine sphere, although the depiction of this sphere varies quite widely from one culture to another (PU 1.§3.2).

The voice of conscience provides another argument of the existence of God. Conscience disquiets us in the face of wrongdoing points to the existence of an all-knowing intelligence that through the conscience speaks to us and warns us when we strive from the right path (PU 1.§3.3). The law is written in the heart, which is an innate law or a natural law, and conscience is a reasoning conducted according to this law (3.§3). Such a law could have been written by no other than God.

Finally, an innate desire of perfect happiness is used to prove God's existence. Since such happiness cannot be achieved in this world and desire for it cannot be in vain, thus there must be a God in whom happiness can be reached (PU 1.§3.4; PS 8.146). However, the desire of happiness is an unconvincing proof of God's existence. Why would such desire be impossible if God did not exist? People would like to be happy, anyway. The desire of happiness, however, is used

as a proof of the immortality of the soul, which can only work under the assumption of the existence of the benevolent God: God would not create humans with such a desire if fulfilling it were not possible. In Platon's times, Anichkov and Zolotnitskii used such an argument to prove the immortality of the soul, and, in passing, so did Platon himself when asking this rhetorical question: would God create man so that he dies after a life of sorrow? (6.335).

God's attributes

Platon also tried to establish rationally God's attributes.

First, God is the first cause and such a God must be one, otherwise, there would not be any first cause (PS 8.158). However, it is possible that in the polytheistic setup one of the gods would be the first cause. Also, it is possible that many or all gods would be co-creators in one act of creation, whereby there would be only one first cause.

Second, all perfections in created beings have their origin in the most perfect God (PS 8.158). This is true under the assumption that, by themselves, created beings can only maintain their level of perfection or become worse (the law of entropy). However, it is possible to imagine that the created things may increase their level of perfection beyond what they were originally endowed with and even beyond the level of the creator(s). Platon also said that in the case of polytheism, perfection would be divided up and only all gods put together would constitute something most perfect; thus, created things could not take some of their perfection without impoverishing them (159). However, in the polytheistic setup, all gods could be equally perfect. Also, creating perfection does not mean taking part of perfection of the creator. Platon would disagree with the statement that when the triune God creates something perfect (humans before the fall), He literally takes part of His perfection and transfers it to the created being, which would not be creation out of nothing, but by emanation (cf. Plotinus' system). Also, when, for instance, a sculptor creates a sculpture of perfect beauty, he does not take away part of his own beauty to be put in the sculpture. In fact, the beauty of his creation can exceed the beauty of his own. Such a situation is also possible in the presence of the multitude of gods.

Third, only one God has no beginning; Platon asked: why should many gods be without beginning? (PS 8.159). We may ask back: why not? Polytheism does not automatically exclude co-eternity of gods. It is theologically admissible that more than one god can eternally exist. Platon also said that when there were many gods, they could not all be everywhere and thus would be limited; if each god were everywhere, then one god would be in another, and effectively, there would be one god, argued Platon. However, the Stoics, who were materialists, spoke

about interpenetration of bodies without one being blended with another. Platon did agree that one God of Christianity is omnipresent by saying that “God permeates and fills each thing” (10.257); “God fills even the smallest creations and forms with it inseparable union”; this is an invisible union that can only be represented mentally (258). Such a pronouncement could be interpreted pantheistically as God being everything. Of course, God is a spiritual being, the world is matter. Therefore, the concept of place has a different significance in the case of a spiritual being than in the case of matter. In what sense is God in a particular place understood as a fragment of three-dimensional space? Surely, not in the same way as an object that is in this place. Therefore, if the polytheistic gods are spiritual beings, they could be said to be in the same place without interfering with one another.

Fourth, God is an ultimate goodness. If there were many gods and their goodness were the same, then neither of them would be ultimate, and thus, none of the gods would be God (PS 8.160), supreme God, that is. That may be true, but why does rationality require the existence of an ultimate goodness? It is possible to envision the creation and maintenance of the world in the case of existence of many gods whose goodness would be on the same level of perfection. Moreover, if there were one god more perfect than others, then this does not necessarily endanger the existence of the world. Consider Plato’s Demiurge who fashioned the world and submitted the continuation of the creative work to other gods.

Fifth, God should be omnipotent (PS 8.160). Many gods would have power in some respects, but not in all; no god would be omnipotent; they could quarrel. True God should be more powerful than anything else (161). It is possible that one god is omnipotent and others are not, which would be quite close to the setup of the Greek mythology with Zeus being the supreme divinity. Also, if many gods have the same level of power, this does not necessarily lead to quarrels among them (although it surely did among Greek gods) if these gods are also supremely good.

Under the heading of God’s omnipotence, Platon’s rebuttal of Manichaeism can be included. Manichaeism is wrong, he said, since (1) it accepts the existence of two principles, but two principles cannot exist everywhere, particularly when they are opposing one another; (2) when these two principles are in contact, they are in conflict, in which one of them should prevail; but omnipotent God would destroy evil, for otherwise, the Almighty would always have an enemy; (3) all evil is not something positive, but only the absence of goodness; evil does not exist; “all that exists by itself is good; and evil as evil, except for what it could be mixed in, does not exist in the world: it is always in a good thing, like a sin in a man and always stems from a good thing, not from its essence, but from an event, when the thing swerves from its path and turns away from the existing order – and such an error is evil” (PS 8.167).

It is unjustified to assume that two principles cannot exist everywhere in the same place, particularly if they are of a spiritual order, whereby “place” must not be interpreted spatially. The point of Manichaeism is that the two opposite principles, at first separate, were mixed together. This accounts for the existence of evil. Also, being mixed does not have to mean that both principles exist in the same place. They may exist in close proximity, which would account for their conflict. Moreover, their contact does not have to lead to one prevailing over the other. If they are of equal strength, then they will keep one another in check resulting in eternal tension. It is also possible that they, as it were, take turns and at one time one principle prevails and the next time another, and so on, indefinitely. This is how Empedocles envisioned his ontology with the powers of love and strife winning over one another in eternal periodicity. The third point, that evil is not something positive, is Platon’s explanation of the nature of evil, in which he followed Augustine: evil does not really exist; evil is an absence of goodness. However, Platon’s explanation that evil stems from an event of swerving from the right path begs a question, how is such swerving possible? A good being would surely want to stay on the right path without breaking an existing order. Why does it do it? Lack of knowledge? Accident? Or willful – thus sinful – breaking of a rule? There is nothing bad or unclean in creation, but good things can become bad by misuse, said Platon (PU 1.§6a). How can such misuse take place in an original perfect creation?

Sixth, there should be one God, since among people, monarchy is the best power (PS 8.161). If each god could have power over all gods, then all gods would be redundant and a god cannot be redundant (162). Theologically, the argument is somewhat precarious, since it requires God to be in a certain way, because humans are; even assuming that monarchy is an ideal way of human government, this does not mean that monarchy has also to be the way God governs. In this way, it may be said that because people need to sleep, so does God. Also, the redundancy argument may be perilous. The whole of Christian religion relies on the fact that God wants to exercise His will through people who should, for instance, help one another in the time of need. Wouldn’t it be done in a more expedite fashion if God Himself performed the helping task? It would be quicker, more efficient, more perfect. And yet, redundantly, God expects people to execute the task.

Seventh, there are different numbers of gods in religions of different nations (PS 8.162), “whereby it can be seen how silly it is to enlist such a crowd of gods in addition to one God” (163). The argument is of an emotional rather than a rational nature. It does implicitly rely on Occam’s razor; by itself, the argument is insufficient. The reality is what it is, the opponent may say, whether it appears to us silly or not, and it is possible that there are more gods than one, but the precise number can be difficult to us, limited beings, to determine; hence, disa-

greements occur between various religions. However, Platon made an interesting case for monotheism as an original religion. In his view, erection of idols is the reason for polytheism. There were no idols made before the flood, and Nachor, Abraham's father, is mentioned as the earliest idolater (Joshua 24:2) (163), although it is not known who was the first. Idolatry, Platon argued after the Book of Wisdom 13-14, could be a result of at least one of three reasons. (1) It started with the worship of the sun, moon, and stars (164). (2) Images were made as consolation after death of a relative. At first, such an image or sculpture was not worshiped, but became worshiped with the passage of time. (3) There were made images of exceptional people (165).

It is worth mentioning that the thesis of the priority of monotheism has not been a favorite theory among historians of religion. It was advocated in the early twentieth century by Wilhelm Schmidt in his multivolume *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (1912).

Theodycy

A particularly vexing theological problem is the origin of evil. Whence came evil in the world created by the perfectly good and omnipotent God? Although briefly, Platon tried to provide some answers.

First, all things were created for a purpose, although we may not know it. There is no randomness in the world; everything happens for a reason. Joseph's misfortunes served for a greater purpose (PS 8.224), namely, the afflictions that beset Joseph served a grand purpose of rescuing his family from famine and then the growth of the Israelites in Egypt. Moreover, persecution by enemies can be considered God's gift since it prevents faith from weakening. It can contribute to the greater glory of the persecuted (11.216). A general chooses a brave soldier for a battle. "So God, when He allows the righteous to suffer, it is as though He sent them to a battle as brave soldiers so that by overcoming the opposition and hardship they can in this way show and glorify their bravery" (6.320). So, it should be our consolation that God is always with us (321).

Second, many decent people live in poverty and suffering, but they have a clean conscience, patience, and a hopeful heart; sinners live in riches but with no inner joy (PS 8.224-225). We may, however, ask, what of it? Decent people patiently endure suffering and go in good spirits through bad times *in spite of* what they experience. Can an argument be made that they stayed whole and sane *because* of their afflictions?

Third, God sends illness, bad weather, infertility, etc. to make people humble and bring them to His designs or to punish them (PS 8.225). Is it always the case? Christ Himself said that those who perished under ruins of a collapsed tower were

the same sinners as others (Lk. 13:4-5), and yet they lost their lives, and others did not. The problem was quite alive in Platon's times because of the earthquake in Lisbon (1755).⁶ Were people in Lisbon so much more sinful that this natural disaster fell upon them, but not upon any other city?

Fourth, why do dangerous animals exist? They are the result of sin, whereby man's ruling over the earth ended; however, man has reason and he should be able to avoid such animals. Irrational animals know what is useful and what is harmful; all the more humans should know it; besides, what is harmful for some creatures can be beneficial for others (PS 8.225; cf. 10.205-206), some poisons can be applied as medicine if used in proper way.

Fifth, God wants human reason to be always active (PS 2.208). One way to keep it active is to create problems in human lives so that humans can use their wits to find solutions in bothersome situations. If there is an illness, it often happens that discoverers find a cure for it (209). Apparently, the sharpness of the mind can best be maintained when man is not too comfortable.

Sixth, everything is orderly directed by God, although we can think otherwise; we cannot comprehend all divine mysteries, and we should not be too curious about them and simply trust God (PS 8.225).

Platon's arguments are far from being overwhelmingly convincing, and they really amount to the mystery of God's designs that we cannot penetrate with our reason. Admittedly, theodicy is one of the most difficult theological problems that still remains largely unresolved today. Faith should suffice that there is a greater reason in all that we encounter and trust that God should get everyone through.

The Scriptures

Platon tried to justify the divine provenance of the Bible as the word of God.

First, "only Prophetic and Apostolic books are written in such a language, in such an order, and in such a living simplicity (1 Cor. 2.4) that they show that their origin is not human, but divine. Only in them we can read words and reason which lead either to great love or to living sensitivity. There are no verbal tricks there. There are no human embellishments, there is only blessing consisting in power" (PS 8.46). The argument is very subjective; by the same token, a divine quality has been and still is ascribed to the verses of many poets and to the prose of many writers. Actually, a religious argument can be made that the beauty of someone's writing is of exceptional quality, although it is of a devilish inspira-

⁶ For the scope of the discussion of this particular problem see U. Löffler, *Lissabons Fall – Europas Schrecken: Die Deutung des Erdbebens von Lissabon im deutschsprachigen Protestantismus des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1999.

tion, in order to seduce the reader to a particular way of thinking that may include heresy. Beauty cannot always be equated with truth and goodness.⁷

Second, there is “an amazing similarity and agreement in all parts of the Prophetic and Apostolic teaching” (PS 8.46); for instance, what is mentioned briefly in one place is presented more elaborately in another. Consistency is always a great attribute of any writing and, arguably, it is the most important quality of any scientific text. Platon probably would not like to put scholars on equal footing with the Bible in respect to the divine inspiration. Therefore, the agreement argument is simply much too weak.

Third, the inner testimony of believers’ hearts testifies to the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, since accepting the word enkindles living faith in the love of God in Christ (PS 8.47; PU 2.§2b). True, many people were led to the Christian faith only by listening to or by reading the Scriptures, but, arguably, this is an infrequent occurrence. More often than not, a conversation or series of conversations with someone or participation in a revival service or reading some evangelical tracts or books is followed by the experience of conversion. Surely, the Scriptures are used in the process, but it would be difficult to distinguish what finely touched someone’s heart, the Scriptures, their interpretation, a description of someone’s own experience, or something else, and, clearly, Platon would not want to treat sermons, evangelical books, etc. the same way as the Scriptures. He could agree that a preacher (including himself) could be inspired by the Holy Spirit (and he not infrequently called upon such divine help), but the resulting sermon would not be treated as a canonical writing the way the Bible is.

Fourth, “an unbroken agreement of the entire church and all believers” (PS 8.47), the universal acceptance of Scriptures points to their divine origin. The “entire church,” in spite of his wide definition that the church is “the congregation of people who believe in Jesus Christ” (PU 2.§4), for Platon did not include the Catholics and Protestants; therefore, Platon would not be troubled that the Septuagint recognized by the Orthodox church does not quite match the Bible recognized by the Catholics (the canonical Old Testament is in Hebrew, not in Greek) nor the Protestant Bible from which deuterocanonical books and fragments have been removed.

Fifth, the amazing power of the apostles’ preaching allowed for their teaching to spread widely so forcefully and so quickly (PU 2.§2b). The argument is also used today considering the fact that a ragtag and unschooled group of believers were able to preach the Gospel so forcefully that it affected sometimes thousands of people to join their faith and that the faith overcame tremendous persecutions and eventually became the official religion of the Roman empire.

⁷ “Though truth is always beautiful, beauty is not always true,” P. Evdokimov, *The art of the icon: a theology of beauty*, Redondo 1990, p. 37. The Book of Wisdom 15:20 reports that “carried by the beauty” of an image, people “accorded divine honors” to the person represented by the image.

In the end, “these proofs are sufficient for those who have inwardly a testimony of the Holy Spirit about the word of God” (PS 8.48). This would mean that the proofs are convincing for those who do not really need a proof since they already believe that the Bible comes directly from God. These proofs, then, would only enhance the existing faith, and they would put it on a stronger footing.

Although his proofs are hardly convincing by themselves – and they cannot expect to overpower an unbeliever with their convincing power – it is Platon’s merit to point to the need of giving some arguments concerning the sacred character of the Bible. Virtually the only argument that was used in the Orthodox tradition was the fourth proof, the argument of “unbroken agreement” that goes back to the apostolic times. The existence of the church and the fact of using the same Scriptures from its inception indicated that the Bible is the word of God. Platon is a rare example, particularly among the Orthodox ecclesiastics, to see a need to go beyond this fact. After all, many hymns and prayers go back to the original church, and yet they are not of the same stature as the Bible.

Platon was a sincere believer but also a child of his age, the age of Enlightenment and its philosophical influence streaming particularly from France. Instead of giving in, Platon enlisted the rational approach in his defense of the Christian religion, which was rare among the Orthodox ecclesiastics.

Some of natural theology approach can be found in lectures of Prokopovich and Konisskii. Prokopovich stated that faith and natural reason teach that God is infinite goodness and ineffable beauty⁸; he was proving the veracity of the Bible with rational means,⁹ and was rationally proving the existence of God.¹⁰ According to Konisskii natural reason can be used to prove existence of God.¹¹ However, most Orthodox ecclesiastics limited themselves to apologetics, dogmatics, and moral teaching. And so, in his *Rock of Faith*, Iavorskii took first principles of Christian faith for granted without scrutinizing them; Rostovskii did not raise the problem of the existence of God in his writings, and so did not Zadonskii¹² and

⁸ Theophan[es] Prokopowicz, *Miscellanea sacra*, Wratislaviae 1744, p. 256.

⁹ Theophanes Prokopowicz, *Christianae orthodoxae theologiae*, Leipzig 1782, vol. 1, p. 27; В.Г. Смирнов, *Феофан Прокопович*, Москва 1994, pp. 75-76.

¹⁰ В.Г. Смирнов, *Феофан Прокопович*, op. cit., 55. “The richness of scientific material and strong logical reasoning make this part one of the best parts in all treatises [i.e., in *Christianae orthodoxae theologiae*].” Феофан Тихомиров, *Трактаты Феофана Прокоповича о Боге едином по существу и троичном в Лицах*, Санкт-Петербург 1884, p. 19; Феофан Прокопович, *Сочинения*, Москва 1961, p. 182; П. Морозов, *Феофан Прокопович как писатель*, Санкт Петербург 1880, pp. 134-135.

¹¹ Г. Конисский, *Философські твори*, Київ 1990 [1749], vol. 2, pp. 533-536.

¹² Only marginally he made use of the physico-theological argument by pointing to the fact that the observation of nature leads to the recognition of the almighty God, Т. Задонский, *Об истинном христианстве* [1777], in his *Творения*, Москва 2003, vol. 3, p. 38 (§27.i); heavens

Velichkovskii. This was in line with traditional Orthodox outlook. As stated by Maximus the Confessor, “to the devout believer God gives something more sure than any proof: the recognition and faith that He substantively is. Faith is true knowledge, the principles of which are beyond rational demonstration; for faith makes real for us things beyond mind and reason” (*Two hundred texts on theology* 1.9). At best, Greek Fathers made an implicit use of physico-theological argument when stating, for example, that “by the greatness and beauty of the creatures proportionately the maker of them is seen [Wisdom 13:5]” (Athanasius, *Contra gentes* 44); that “the harmonious web of the whole” points to its Author (Maximus the Confessor, *The ambigua* 10.18); that God can be seen through “beauty and order of visible things” (Caesarius, *Oration* 28.13); that “the world is good and all its contents are seen to be wisely and skillfully ordered. All of them, therefore, are the works of” God (Gregory of Nyssa, *The great catechism* 1); that it is impossible that the world of such grandeur and quality can be reigned by chance, not by God (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Poemata arcana* 1.1.5.7-8).

Platon extended the Orthodox tradition by incorporation in it the rational approach to theology that was very strong in Western Christianity. The fact that Platon used natural theology as a legitimate tool in presenting and defending Christianity was very likely also dictated by the atmosphere of the imperial court: the empress Catherine viewed herself as an enlightened monarch, which was reflected in her literary output and voluminous correspondence with Voltaire.

However, Platon’s presentation of natural theology is frequently heavy-handed, incompletely and unconvincingly argued, and often simply inept. It was, at least, a good starting point for other church writers to follow. Of course, by its nature, natural theology has its limits and hardly all truths of Christianity can be proven by it. The reference to the Scriptures and to faith is unavoidable, but this does not mean necessarily abandoning theology. The doctrine of the Trinity can hardly be proven by natural theology alone (although some attempts had been made), yet it led to long and often sophisticated theological discussions. However, when it comes to such issues, Platon limited himself only to dogmatics and apologetics. His presentation of the truths of Christianity remains on the level of a catechism for the young, the simple, and the lazy. There is nothing objectionable in it, but there is really nothing theologically inspiring, either. Platon simply stated such truths as the existence of sin, Christ’s incarnation, the afterlife in heaven or in hell, etc., but the readers and listeners would not learn from Platon anything beyond what they could read in the Scriptures by themselves. There is no venturing into a theological discussion of the problem of incarnation, the problem of the existence of sin, the problem of the eternal punishment for sins com-

proclaim the glory of God and everything proclaims that everything was created, p. 91 (§27.lxvii); created things are “traces and testimonies that point to God and we learn from and are urged by them to love and honor God,” p. 610 (§194.3); p. 172 (§27.cxviii).

mitted during finite life, etc. Platon was considered to have been one of the most illustrious ecclesiastics of his times.¹³ Regrettably, this is not quite reflected in the many volumes of his writings.

Metropolita Platon o teologii naturalnej

Streszczenie

Platon pozostawił po sobie 20 tomów *Pouczających wypowiedzi*, z których 17 to kazania i okolicznościowe przemówienia. Kazania są raczej proste i nawiązują do przestrzegania podstawowych obowiązków chrześcijańskich, które winny być spełnione przez każdego, bez względu na pozycję społeczną. W naukach katechetycznych proponował pewne racjonalne argumenty teologii naturalnej przy wprowadzaniu podstawowych prawd religii chrześcijańskiej. Aby udowodnić istnienie Boga, odwoływał się do samowiedzy, do konieczności istnienia pierwszej przyczyny, do harmonii świata, do powszechnej zgody, do głosu sumienia, a także do wrodzonego pragnienia doskonałego szczęścia. Próbował również racjonalnie wyprowadzić monoteizm, określić atrybuty Boga i wyjaśnić istnienie zła. Ponadto Platon próbował uzasadnić boskie pochodzenie Biblii jako słowa Bożego. Platon był jednym z niewielu duchownych prawosławnych, którzy używali teologii naturalnej jako dopuszczalnego narzędzia do prezentacji i obrony chrześcijaństwa. Jednak jego teologiczna prezentacja jest często niepełna i nie zawsze przekonująca.

Słowa kluczowe

Platon, teologia naturalna, teodycea, dowody na istnienie Boga, Oświecenie

Keywords

Platon, natural theology, theodicy, proofs of the existence of God, Enlightenment

¹³ E.g., Н.В. Бессарабова, *Мировоззрение и деятельность митрополита Платона (Левшина)*, "Вопросы истории" 2008, no. 1, p. 141; А.С. Глазева, *Жизнь и взгляды московского митрополита Платона (Левшина)*, "Российская история" 2010, no. 6, p. 120.