

Volodymyr Vakin

The Role of Christian Freedom in the Light of the Orthodox Church's Teachings in a Secularized Society

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VOLODYMYR VAKIN

Volyn Orthodox Theological Academy in Lutsk, Ukraine

The Role of Christian Freedom in the Light of the Orthodox Church's Teachings in a Secularized Society

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The concept of freedom has several meanings. Here we are going to discuss three of them. The first one relates to its metaphysical dimension, where freedom is understood as one of the most fundamental qualities of human nature; the free will, expressed in the inner self-determination of the individual in front of the choice, first and foremost, between the good and the evil. The free will is one of those qualities the loss of which leads to complete degradation of the individual. No one has the power over this freedom, neither another individual, nor society, laws, any authority, demons, angels, nor even God himself. Macarius of Egypt says: “And you are created in the God’s own image, because God is free and creates what he wants [...] thus free are you.”¹ “Therefore, our nature is favourable for the good and for the evil, and for the grace of God, as well as for the adversary.” The classic aphorism of Fathers of the Church: “God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us” beautifully expresses the Christian understanding of the meaning and the importance of this freedom.

¹ Макарий Египетский: *Духовные беседы* (Перевод с греческого. Репринтное издание 1904 г.). издание, Свято-Троицкая Сергиева Лавра 1994, p. 121.

The second dimension of freedom is a social one. It means a set of certain individual rights in the state and society. It is in this area that the most difficult issues occur, since in the society many individuals with free will are interacting and confronting one another. Overall, it is the problem of external freedoms of an individual, or the problem of allowed (by laws, customs, religion, and conventional morality) actions in the surrounding world.

The third dimension of freedom is spiritual one. Unlike external freedom, it carries the meaning of the superiority of the man over his/her selfishness, his/her passions, sinful feelings, and desires — power over oneself. This freedom is achieved only with proper spiritual life that makes the believer able to communicate with God who is the only one in the possession of absolute spiritual freedom. Saints who are free from passions can achieve great freedom. The “common” people have a relative spiritual freedom (John 8:34). Only those who had become consolidated with the evil, who had spoken against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31—32) and, as a result, were not capable of goodness, lost it. Christianity, therefore, sees the ideal of spiritual freedom in God, and thus in principle rejects any possibility of absolute freedom in the man. Sergei Bulgakov wrote: “Freedom [of a person] is relative [...]. It stands and falls, it is overcome and surpassed and excelled during the path through the earthly life to its deification. Freedom does not mean the self-dependent strength, and it is the infirmity in the face of God.”² Saint Isaac the Syrian, in turn, says: “For there is no perfect freedom in this imperfect age.”³

Paul the Apostle says: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). He calls the person who has reached the Christian freedom “the new self” (Ephesians 4:24), stressing the renewal of his mind, heart, will, and body. And vice versa, those who live sinfully are called “old selves” (Ephesians 4:22), “slaves” (Romans 6:6—17), as those who cannot follow his words, as well as faith, mind, and conscience, and they know it to be a blessing. This state of spiritual slavery as the antithesis of the true freedom is described by Paul the Apostle in the following way: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do [...]. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing [...], but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me” (Romans 7:15, 19, 23).

² Епископ Сильвестр Каневский (Малеванский): *Опыт православного догматического богословия (с историческим изложением догматов)*, Т. 1, [Сочинение] епископа Сильвестра, 3-е изд. Киев: типорграфия Г.Т. Корчак-Новицкого, 1892, p. 40.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

These three dimensions of freedom mentioned above allow us to say with absolute confidence what kind of freedom is the primary purpose of the life to a Christian. Of course, it is the spiritual freedom which can only be achieved by living a righteous life. What kind of life is this? What laws apply here? And according to which criteria one can judge the rightness or wrongness of the chosen path? And finally: What stages must the man pass in order to reach such freedom? — are some of the important questions that require special consideration.

When discussing the freedom of the Church, however, we should take into account different dimensions of freedom. In this case, first of all, it is necessary to refer to the understanding of the Church as such. The Church is the unity of all intelligent creatures in the Holy Spirit who follow the will of God, and thus are the part of the Mystical Body of Christ — “His Body” (Ephesians 1:23).⁴ The degree of His involvement into individual Christians, is hidden from the external view, because the sincerity of faith and sanctity of soul are impenetrable for human standards.

External and always imperfect expression of the Body of Christ — the Church — is a visible Christian community headed by a bishop who guarantees the unity of faith, the foundations of spiritual life, control, and discipline. The membership in the visible Church is no longer a secret: all are christened, regardless of holiness or depravities of their lives. Thus, canonically none of them is excluded from it. Along those lines, no local Church is save from degradation, possibly ending in the total loss of the Holy Spirit and conversion to a laic organization by its objectives and goals that keep all Christian set of attributes.

However, while the visible Church keeps the dogmatic teaching intact, the correct doctrine of spiritual life, the basic principles of canonical order and zeal of its members to live by the Gospel, and with the presence of natural human flaws, as the soul in the body, it has the Holy Spirit of Pentecost, and it constitutes a kind of the foundation which accompanies the process of birth, formation, and salvation of a Christian. Therefore, the Church is the anthropic. And because of its double nature, it has two different freedoms that are unparalleled among themselves. The Church as the invisible unity in the Holy Spirit of all those who love Christ is always free, because “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the freedom.” It is higher than all external freedoms, rights, and privileges. It is not afraid of any human limitations and oppressions, thus persecution can only add to it more glory. Such it was during the earthly life of Jesus Christ and His

⁴ Наан Густав Иоганнович: *Симметричная Вселенная*. Доклад на Астрономическом совете АН СССР 29 января 1964 г. Тартуская астрономическая обсерватория. Публикации. Тарту, Т. 56, 1966, p. 43.

apostles, such it is after His Resurrection, Ascension and it is so to this day, because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

The visible Church is a community that, alike any public and/or religious organizations, requires appropriate conditions for its existence, including the religious freedoms regulated by state laws.

Religious freedom is the right to confess openly and practically implement the religious beliefs, both individually and collectively. In this respect, religious freedom is no different from the most important social or external freedoms and rights which citizens of the country and members of various secular organizations have.

The subject of Christian freedom is one of the deepest and brightest amongst the moral messages of Church. Whatever manifestations of the human person were examined and studied by Church, their ethical evaluation is possible only when the freedom of moral self-determination rights is presupposed. The interpretation of the problem of freedom has an essential ideological value and comprehensively encompasses human existence. The secret of freedom lies in the explanation of the moral value of human life, the key to the fall of primordial human (the biblical Adam and Eve) and his/her fate. The theme of freedom seems to be an important motif in the context of Orthodox Christian faith and, above all, the Church’s teaching on salvation and deification of the human. The promise of the Kingdom of God belongs to those who entered into a new life in Christ during their terrestrial existence and, as a result, are not subjected to the law but to the Grace, and open themselves for joy and celebration of spiritual freedom. And since we cannot come to God because of the sin, which became an insurmountable obstacle to us, God Himself came to us.⁵ In playing the whole system of life based on personal spiritual freedom, Eastern Orthodox tradition sees one of the most important conditions for achieving human deification as the initial problem of human existence.

Freedom is the ability of an individual for a creative development within the possibilities that are determined by God. In terms of its metaphysical meaning, freedom is a priceless gift of God’s goodness, wisdom, and love that a person gets in his/her possession. God gives a human freedom in his/her property as a kind of source which allows people to reveal their potential creatively and become stronger in the present secularized society. Although everything in the world lies within the law of necessity, human, thanks to freedom, is not subjected to this law after all. A human is the author of his/her establishment as he/she has freedom.

⁵ Калліст (Уер), митрополит: *Православна Церква*. Перевод, Киев: ДУХ І ЛІТЕРА, 2009, р. 225.

It is within human power to change and guide the process of his/her formation and development. A human is the cause of his/her condition. Having the gift of freedom, a person mentions the process of his/her formation, preferring a particular law of existence. Embodying capacity for moral guidance in values, one consciously and freely makes moral choices and forms him-/herself in the process of becoming a moral person. Freedom is the deepest moral basis of personality, his/her exclusive privilege and inalienable gift. It is worth paying attention to the words of Jesus Christ in the New Testament: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:32). Freedom cannot come from below, by nature, as in nature there is no freedom. Freedom can only come from above, only if there is an Absolute Spirit of Freedom, if the Divine Freedom, being not determined by anyone or anything, reigns over the world of nature and determinism. According to the Reverend Sylvanus Athos: "The essence of an absolute freedom lies beyond any dependency or need, any restriction to determine one's existence. This is freedom of God, an individual does not have that/this freedom."⁶

It is written in Bible: "And God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1: 26) reveal to us the man as the image and likeness of the Free Divine Spirit and indicate that a human is a carrier of freedom in the world of nature. Human is not only the soil but the spirit as well. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). Holy God protects ontological human freedom never humiliating one's will. Freedom is the meaning and fullness of life. St Paul exhorts: "Stand for freedom that Christ has given us, and not fall again under the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1). Freedom here is opposed to slavery, which refers to sin and death. Sin is not that we fall and sin, but that we do not notice a real fall, do not notice the fall and degradation of our life. The same can be said about the enslavement of human by death. Despite the fear of it, we recognize it completely legitimate and normal. Thus, sin is "part of our conscious recognition of death."

Therefore, until the man is enslaved by sin and death and he or she feels them as terrible oppression, considerations of human freedom are all in vain. Nowadays, many people struggle for freedom, free speech, and democracy. This is good, but those struggles need to be liberated from sin by means of the Holy Spirit. Often those who crave freedom are the servants of sin, a sin of vanity and pride, avarice, and the accumulation of wealth. If we talk about ordinary people, among them there are many slaves to, for example, alcoholism, and drug or sex addiction.

⁶ Софроний (Сахаров) Архимандрит: *Преподобный Силуан Афонский*. Сергиев Посад: Свято-Троицкая Сергиева Лавра, 2006, p. 115.

The task of becoming human presupposes his/her freedom. Like any gift received by the man from God, freedom is open to improvement. Compared with absolute freedom of God, human freedom is incomplete and imperfect. God gave man the gift as a kind of guarantee, by using which a person could bring freedom to the moral perfection and completeness which, in turn, could be mostly found to display absolute freedom of God. Human is free, that is, he/she is the image of divine freedom due to which one is endowed with the ability to choose.⁷ From this standpoint, the individual is entrusted with a task of achieving deification, so it is necessary and important to establish what is able to determine the completeness and perfection of one's will.

To answer the addressed question, one must bear in mind the duality of human nature and human existence, that is, the human "ownership" right to the both worlds — the material and the spiritual. This duality is an existential root of human freedom, the mystery of one's self-determination in terms of achievement and realization of the value of one's life. The Orthodox patristic tradition considers the duality of human nature and human existence as the brightest and the most unique characteristic of a person which demonstrates the versatility of his/her purpose in the overall structure of the world. In St Gregory the Theologian we find the most striking interpretation of the duality of human existence in the entire patristic literature. "God sets another angel on earth, of different natures composed fan [...]. As a viewer of visible creation, and the one to whom the spiritual creation is revealed, the man stands on the border of two worlds."⁸ The body of a human belongs to the earth, but his/her mind comes out of the material world and belongs to the world that mind can see, a spiritual world.

The man has a task of creative self-determination in two worlds — the material and spiritual, in values belonging with two dimensions — the real and the ideal. The value of self-determination is that a human is a creative being who is confirmed and always functions within the dynamics of development. Being a human means operating under the sign of the divine definition. The task of spiritual and moral self-determination as human beings in this society involves a move from the world of sense to the transcendental world, from the real world to the ideal. But for us also the real world is sacred, and not only in the sense we use this word when we say that human life is sacred. The world is sacred in the sense that it

⁷ Павел Евдокимов: *Православие*, Перевод с французского (Серия «Современное богословие»). Москва: Издательство ББИ, 2012, р. 105.

⁸ Григорий Богослов: *Собрание творений*. Перевод Московской духовной академии (Серия «Классическая философская мысль»). Минск, Т. 1. Слова. Москва, АСТ, 2000, р. 215.

belongs to God not only potentially, but in its essence. It is God's own world and the Living God is in it.⁹

The real world is a world that is sensible and clear, but at the same time, a biographical world within each individual — the world that passes. A perfect world is a world that can only be grasped by human mind; it can be perceived as a gift and, at the same time, as an expected future world. The value of freedom is the possibility of moral orientation in line with the real and the ideal world, it is a part of the human moral orientation in every single moment of life and in the last closing moment it determines one's fate in eternity. Although, according to the teachings of the Orthodox Church, the real physical world in any case is not evil, it is, however, fraught with temptations that lead to evil. The evil is the manifestation of the inertia of human existence, while the task of becoming human involves an active overcoming of this inertia and achieving moral perfection. Hence, the focus on the real, sensual world has a tendency to stagnate and wane, while the focus on human ideal world excludes this trend. The essence of moral self-determination is that the said orientation in personal life prevails.

If moral orientation of the individual has a constant tendency to prefer the ideal rather than real, for example, prefer spiritual values rather than practical interest, then we can perceive it as a yearning to reach freedom that is both perfect and complete. If this tendency is not present, if the human values real over ideal, then one's personal freedom has not yet reached perfection, and so there may occur stagnation of spiritual life and moral decline. If you put a real goal in front of a human, a tangible goal to which one is dedicated with all his/her heart, it certainly reduces one's freedom. No matter how valuable a given goal is, it will make people consider everything else as a stepping stone or as a means to achieve it. There is only one step from absolutizing any real, sensuous or utilitarian aim to the justification of lawlessness in the course of its achievement. Only the orientation of the individual towards the ideal self-determination, which clearly expresses the absolute will of God, does not limit one's freedom and thus does not exclude the values of the temporal world. Therefore, a person's freedom is initiated by his/her uncoerced actions.¹⁰ In a state of perfect freedom a person is the holder of worldly goods, but none of this goods enslaves a human and inhibits one's will. The orientation of an individual on self-determination as a desire to reach self-fullness in God opens the way for a perfect and complete Christian freedom; for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

⁹ Антоний (Блум), митрополит Сурожский: *Церковь*. Киев: Пролог, 2005, р. 138.

¹⁰ Иоанн Дамаскин, преподобный: *Точный виклад Православної віри*. Київ: Видавничий відділ УПЦ Київського Патріархату, 2010, р. 140.

In the outside world, where everything except the human person is subjected to the law of necessity, we see in the entire creation the creative freedom seal of God. The variety in the manifestation of animal forms of life reminds us of our own liberty. For example, anything related to inanimate nature expresses itself through the form. In the realm of the inanimate our imagination can affect pretentiousness patterns and lines, and beauty of colours and shades, variety of minerals form amazing crystals, artistic shapes rocks and mountain ranges. In this apparent richness and diversity it is hard to escape the impression that inanimate nature tends to use every opportunity to express itself clearly, originally, and colourfully. And what is even more, our imagination affects the processes occurring in inanimate nature through the change and fluidity of its forms. Impressive displays of natural elements in the paintings of the majestic flow of mighty rivers, formidable movement of the waves in the glare of lightning thunder, white winter storm — all of it testifies us more to the freedom of these elements than to the subordination to the law of necessity.

In wildlife we encounter the infinite variety of plant and animal forms. A plethora of trees and grass, beauty and fragrance of flowers and fruit, elegant plumage and polyphonic singing of birds, elegance and grace of animal movement is the general desire of living organism to express themselves through their singularity. A picture of a wild animals, mostly playing, fish that swim in the water, or birds flying high in the sky, makes us forget about the law and the need, however, in contrast to us, serves as a kind of a symbol of freedom, an opportunity to freely exercise our own desires.

If in the creative ideas of God everything inanimate expresses itself through the lifeless form (be it a structure or a process), everything animate expresses itself through its singularity (be it plant or animal individual species), all conscious expresses itself through a person or hypostasis (be it of human or of angelic nature). Registration of nature by hypostasis is the deepest, perfect self-expression and personal creation. There is no animal or plant in which the Creator would not put any force, useful for a human.¹¹ It follows that freedom as the basis of human self-determination is the most absolute and essential characteristic of the individual. God created man and gave him mind along with freedom, with the help of which man is able to generate and show himself as a person.

One cannot present the problem of human freedom only in abstract and metaphysical dimension; it is simply not possible, for example, to speak of human freedom as his/her consent “to be” or “not to be” until it

¹¹ Іоан Дамаскин, преподобний: *Точний виклад Православної віри*. Видавничий відділ УПЦ Київського Патріархату, Київ 2010, р. 108.

occurs. Freedom is a moral, not an ontological basis of personality, because human is the ontological foundation of the creative action of God. Thus, freedom is not an ontological category, but a moral order, a special category of existential importance. Freedom is a self-identity, not based on the dichotomy of “nothingness—being,” but rather “good—evil,” and it is in this final self-identification that the foundation of human choice lies. If the creation of man understood as raising him/her from oblivion to being is realized within the ontological order that excludes human choice, the introduction of human pristine paradise, is a condition of his/her morale, provided in future by human self-determination and choice. The possibility of choice was given because the life in paradise not only constituted a gift of the Creator, but also a merit of human. The man had a goal to establish himself in freedom, within which he was created and where he lived. In observance of the commandments, that is, in obedience to the will of God, the human was to develop the gift of freedom received from God.

From the very beginning, the will of God confronts Adam in two ways. On the one hand, this is the blessing of domination over all the earth and all of the creation.¹² On the other hand, it is a conditional limitation of the will which is contained in the prohibition against eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This duality pointed to the state of exposition of the person in his/her freedom. Without freedom, the prohibition would have had no meaning, without the commandment freedom could not really be held and would have had no value. Instead of admission of the educational value in paradisiacal commandment, that is required for spiritual ascent, Adam ascribes this ban to the jealous desire to God, who wants to keep his supremacy, and shows disobedience. Freedom of the first man really demonstrated the superiority of lower desires and aspirations over the highest spiritual goals.

Throughout the history God reveals His will to the sinful mankind. He gives a person the law and commandments as the rules necessary for life. Again, instead of seeing a moral law bans that limit the power of the evil, man succumbed to the law of sin, the psychological law of the irrational confrontation with the will of God. The nature of the Original Sin and the consequences of Adam’s disobedience led to the fact that people tend to resist all generally mandatory standards. Christ — the new Adam — through voluntary submission to the law freed man from the bondage of the law. Instead of law which subordinated and condemned a human, Christ gave grace that frees and saves people. From now on, no sin, no death separates us from God, because Baptism immerses us in the death

¹² Догматичне богослів’я: Підручник. Чернівці: Рута, 2002, р. 176.

of Christ in order to resurrect us along with Him.¹³ The Son of God came onto the Earth to inform captives, and set the oppressed free. Christ freed fallen man from sin and gave him the true freedom in which each person opens himself to God's Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of spiritual triumph of freedom in its perfect and inexhaustible fullness. Entering the Kingdom of God implies the full realization of the gift of freedom by man.

To summarize, it should be noted that only Christianity could generate the idea of indisputable rights of the human. These human rights are the image and likeness of God, an ontologically unique being. The image of God in a human is saved through the gift of freedom, because it is identical to the personal model of existence, which is the ability to assert or deny true love in life. And because totalitarian regimes oppress and despise God-given human freedom, they are anti-clerical and godless. Any democratic state should help Church to get real freedom that will ensure the formation of free, creative people, able to transform post-totalitarian state into the independent Christian country.

¹³ Владимир Лосский: *Очерк Мистического богословия восточной Церкви. Догматическое богословие*. Киев: Издательство имени святителя Льва, папы Римского, 2004, p. 495.

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The Role of Christian Freedom in the Light of the Orthodox Church's Teachings in a Secularized Society

Summary

This article is dedicated to the Christian understanding of freedom, its kinds and how does a present-day Orthodox Christian use freedom in his/her life. The first kind of freedom pertains to metaphysical dimension. Here we talk about the free will of a human as an image of God, the freedom which is characterized by the presence of a very limited inner choice between the good and the evil. This freedom from the Christian point of view is the person's quality, the losing of which can lead to the complete degradation of a human. There is also a different understanding of freedom. It is connected with a possibility of an individual's actualization in a society, in the social conditions, in a nowadays environment. Here we talk about the freedom of human deeds. One may call it the outer freedom. If we speak of more concrete facet of human life, the social dimension thereof, then it translates into the human rights — the human's freedom. But this outside freedom is not only restricted to human rights. Every country guarantees its own rights, but the external freedom is more complicated — it represents the human attitude to nature. So the outer freedom is a very broad concept. Christianity points to the third kind of freedom, the most important one from the Christian point of view. This is the spiritual freedom. This third category means the human's superiority to his/her desires, in other words, the rule of mind's priority over the heart. In Christianity this ascendancy has a special content because here we first of all talk about the root of all addictions, which is pride.

VOLODYMYR VAKIN

Le rôle de la liberté chrétienne à la lumière de l'enseignement de l'Église orthodoxe dans la société sécularisée

Résumé

Cet article est consacré à la compréhension chrétienne de la liberté, à ses types et aux façons d'appliquer cette liberté dans la vie d'un chrétien orthodoxe contemporain. Le premier type de liberté a une dimension métaphysique. On parle du libre arbitre de l'homme créé à l'image de Dieu, d'une liberté se caractérisant par la présence du choix intérieur limité entre le Bien et le Satan. Cette liberté, du point de vue chrétien, constitue une valeur particulière dont la perte peut conduire à la dégradation complète de l'homme. Il existe aussi une autre compréhension de la liberté. On l'unit à la possibilité de la réalisation d'un être humain dans la société, dans les conditions sociales contemporaines. On parle de la liberté des actes de l'homme. On peut l'appeler une liberté extérieure. Son extension n'est pas déterminée uniquement par les droits de l'homme. Chaque pays garantit ses propres droits de liberté et la liberté extérieure englobe aussi l'attitude de l'homme envers la nature.

Par conséquent, la liberté extérieure est une notion très vaste. Le christianisme dénote également le troisième type de liberté, étant le plus important du point de vue chrétien. C'est une liberté spirituelle. Cette troisième catégorie désigne l'avantage de l'homme sur ses désirs, en d'autres termes, il s'agit du principe de la supériorité de l'esprit sur le cœur.

Mots clés : liberté chrétienne, société, péché, mort, Église orthodoxe, personne, autodétermination, choix, volonté, droit, Royaume de Dieu

VOLODYMYR VAKIN

Il ruolo della libertà cristiana alla luce degli insegnamenti della Chiesa ortodossa nella società secolarizzata

Sommario

Quest'articolo è dedicato alla comprensione cristiana della libertà, ai suoi generi e ai modi di fruire di tale libertà nella vita del cristiano ortodosso di oggi. Il primo genere di libertà ha una dimensione metafisica. Parliamo del libero arbitrio dell'uomo creato ad immagine di Dio, della libertà caratterizzata dalla presenza della scelta interiore limitata tra il Bene e Satana. Questa libertà, dal punto di vista cristiano, costituisce un valore personale la cui perdita può portare al decadimento completo dell'uomo. Esiste anche una comprensione diversa della libertà. La si unisce alla possibilità di realizzazione dell'individuo nella società, nelle attuali condizioni sociali. Parliamo della libertà d'azione dell'uomo. Si può chiamarla libertà esterna. Il suo campo non è delimitato soltanto dai diritti dell'uomo. Ogni stato garantisce i propri diritti di libertà, e la libertà esterna include anche la condotta dell'uomo nei confronti della natura.

La libertà esterna è quindi un concetto molto ampio. Il cristianesimo indica anche un terzo genere di libertà, il più importante dal punto di vista cristiano. Si tratta della libertà spirituale. Questa terza categoria significa la prevalenza dell'uomo sui suoi desideri, in altre parole il principio della precedenza dell'intelletto sul cuore.

Parole chiave: libertà cristiana, società, peccato, morte, Chiesa Ortodossa, persona, autodeterminazione, scelta, volontà, diritto, Regno di Dio