

# The Phenomenon of Mercy in Orthodoxy: The Relationship of Theory and Practice

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**Abstract** — Religion, with its postulates of helping its neighbor, has identified many current forms of social support. Thus, religious norms over time become a way of life, part of the culture, public morality and behavior for individual nations and peoples. Charitable activities are sometimes closely linked with the spread of dogma, including among followers of other religions, and somehow turn out to be an integral part of missionary work, which, in turn, leads to social tension. Another specific problem is the lack of experience among government officials in managing this important area of social activity. All this and much more require scientific reflection.

**Keywords** — *charity, charity, Christianity as a world cultural tradition, virtues and compassion in Orthodoxy.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Background

A social phenomenon, which is commonly called charity, had different names in different cultures. Social development has made adjustments to the content and interpretation of the concept of “charity”. It has historically changed, filled with a different content, just as the scale and forms of merciful-charitable practice have changed. Today, the relevance of the topic of Christian charity is determined by the following:

- serious social problems that affect not only the religious, in particular, the Christian community, but society as a whole;
- increased social activity of Christian religious and public organizations;
- a set of issues related to organizational and practical innovations in the social ministry of Christian denominations and their theological foundations, covering an extremely wide area of research and requiring rethinking and development in the language of the categorical-conceptual apparatus of anthropology, social philosophy, religious studies, and social work;
- the need to adapt the system of social service that has developed in Christianity to external transformations and new challenges of society.

In relation to Russia, the relevance of the study, in addition to the above, is due to the fact that most of the population professes Christianity of various faiths. Some of these denominations are unconventional for the country, which causes wariness and fear, sometimes hostility from supporters of traditional Christianity (Russian Orthodoxy).

In its modern forms, the Christian doctrine of charity is an integral part of the Christian social doctrine, which in its modern interpretation appears in Catholicism in the 19th century, in Orthodoxy and Protestantism in the 20th century. However, its sources, of course, are contained in the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition, in the writings of the church fathers, in the works of Christian thinkers, which became the main sources of this article.

According to Christian standards common to Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism, it is believed that the only right disposition of wealth is a concern for the poor [1]. Aligning with the pagans that the poor are under the special protection of divine powers, Christians borrowed from the Greeks and Romans the idea of charity as restoring social justice and responsibility of the rich to the poor, as well as the practice of electing certain people to perform social services. It was the Christians who created the first public charitable organizations and introduced them into Roman law.

Christianity made a great historical synthesis, inheriting and transforming in its own way the intellectual conquests of previous eras, the ideas and images of various religions of the Middle East, the traditions of Greco-Roman ancient philosophy. At the same time, the development of previously existing philosophical and religious thought went in line with the spiritual and moral searches of the era, which made Christianity especially attractive.

Christianity contains a whole set of value orientations. The leading place among them is occupied by moral and ethical issues. Christianity is not so much a religion about the structure of the universe and society as a religion about how a person lives, the meaning of human existence, conscience, duty, and honor. Even purely religious worship services, Christianity gave a moral and ethical orientation.

The main of Christian virtues is love. The ancient Greek language - the language of the Gospels - knew four words translated into Russian as «love»: Eros, Filia, Storge and Agape. Eros is the love between a man and a woman. Filia is the love of friends. Storge is the love of parents for children, and agape is the love of Christians, not only to each other, but to everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs [2]. Jesus speaks of this love to his disciples in a farewell conversation: «I give you a new commandment: that you love one another, as I have loved you, and that you love one another. By this I know everything that you are My disciples, if you have love among yourself» [3].

Speaking about the benevolent and loving attitude towards people, Jesus teaches not to judge anyone, not to condemn other people. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expressed this idea in one simple demand: «Do not judge, so that you are not judged, for by what judgment you judge and by what measure you will measure it». «What do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but don't notice the log in your eye? ». These instructions conclude with a conclusion that can underlie the philanthropic and humane morality: «So, in everything you want people to do with you, so do you with them» [4].

Man needs to be loved for who he is. Jesus preferred to deal with ordinary people. Moreover, all the outcasts found in him a friend and protector. When people were wondering why Master was talking with people of dubious reputation, he answered them: «Not healthy people need a doctor, but patients. Go and learn what it means: «I want mercy, not sacrifice. I came to call not the righteous, but sinners» [5].

Follow the New Testament moral commandments is capable of a person possessing moral wealth. In his sermons, Christ calls people to collect imperishable treasures in their souls. Only moral wealth can be considered its property in the true sense of the word, for such a treasure is connected with the inner essence of man, and no one and nothing has power over him.

The truths set forth by Christ seem simple and clear, because in many ways they are the quintessential attitude of an ordinary person. His service to God turns into a service to people, for it is impossible to love God without loving your neighbor. Moreover, Christ transfers the kingdom of God into the heart of man; therefore God and moral law become identical. Being a Christian means realizing the spirit of the gospel and living in accordance with it.

#### *B. Status of a Problem*

So, Christianity forms a new ethical system.

The idea of mercy was widespread in Ancient Russia. From the very first days of its existence, the Church categorically forbade making human sacrifices to deities, ritual murders of wives or slaves after the death of their husbands and masters. The Russian tradition of mercy, according to the prominent Russian historian V.O. Klyuchevsky, in its outward manifestation, was understood as «impoverishment» [6].

In 996, Prince Vladimir established almshouses, hotels, houses of foreign citizens. Moreover, "tithing" was determined for their maintenance (from the sale of bread, livestock, and court fees). Following Prince Vladimir, other princes were actively engaged in charity work. Among them, they especially note Prince Jaroslav Vladimirovich, at which the first school for poor young men was opened in Novgorod. From the very beginning, the Russian Orthodox Church took control of people deprived of their livelihood. From the time of the Christianization of Russia to the Petrine reforms, the cause of «public charity» was exclusively in the hands of the church. Mercy and charity were inseparably assigned to the church by the Charter of Prince Vladimir [7]. The Russian Orthodox

Church, the structural formation of which ended in the era of Jaroslav the Wise (1019-1054), also created its own charity center, which was located within the walls of the Kiev-Pechersky Monastery. This monastery was known for its mercy towards those in needs: it had a free hotel for pilgrims, a hospital with 80 beds and a free refectory for poor travelers. This was the development of the charitable and charitable institute of the Russian Orthodox Church, which had its own social workers, hospitals, and pharmacies in the person of monks, as well as financial means from tithes.

During the Tatar-Mongol yoke, the Russian Orthodox Church, which had about 100 monasteries by the end of the 20th century, became the only refuge for people in need and almost completely took upon itself charitable functions. Since getting rid of the Tatar-Mongol yoke in the second half of the 15th century, a new stage begins in the development of the charitable activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, Joseph-Volokolamsk Monastery, which had a strange house, hotel, hospital, almshouse and church parish school for 18 boys, gained great fame thanks to its charitable activities. The role and importance of the church in charity especially grows after the Stoglav Cathedral in 1551, when the state began to strive to regulate the charity of churches and monasteries. They were instructed to rewrite the needy in all cities and arrange male and female almshouses for them under the guidance of priests, as well as support these institutions through donations [8]. In addition, special attention was paid to free literacy of poor children, orphans, for whom shelters were opened at monasteries, parish schools.

The liquidation of the Patriarchate under Peter I, the secularization of church property, sharply reduced the level of church charity. The functions of charity were transferred to the state system of public charity; the necessary resources from the Church were taken away [9]. With the establishment of orders for public charity in 1775, the latter was instructed to set up orphan and work homes for beggars begging [10]. Thus, charitable activities became possible not only through donations in favor of those in need, but also thanks to special charitable structures.

In 1864, Alexander II passed legislation on church fraternities and parish trusteeship, which regulated church charity. Since 1866, the establishment of charity and educational institutions at the monasteries has become mandatory for each newly opened monastery [11]. From 1870 to 1886, 37 monasteries were established that involved in charity work [12]. Since the mid-19th century, a new form of charity has been developing for Russia - nursing charity. By December 1, 1907, there were 907 male and female monasteries in Russia, of which about a quarter were monasteries engaged in charitable activities.

One of the important forms of collecting donations from individuals in pre-revolutionary Russia was the issue and sale (with the direct participation of the Russian Orthodox Church) of special charitable stamps. They were a kind of receipt confirming the fact of beneficence. The form of reporting and

control over the expenditure of funds was charitable bonds - coupons, checks, receipts, credit marks. By agreement with the owners of stores, shops, canteens and tea houses, these currency substitutes were accepted as payments for goods, products and services. All of the above allows us to say that the Russian Orthodox Church until 1917 paid great attention to the problems of mercy and social service. During this period, a theory of mercy begins to be developed, supported by charitable activities, both by individuals and unions, the church and the state, through the charity of the poor, maimed, widows, and orphans.

After the October Revolution of 1917, charity was declared characteristic only of bourgeois society. The position of the Russian Orthodox Church in the state has also changed. All manifestations of socially significant activity of the church were nullified. In November 1917, all charitable institutions and societies for helping people with disabilities and their families were abolished. However, the existence of acute social problems forced to resort to organized forms of manifestation of mercy and charity. During the famine in the Volga region in the early 20's Patriarch Tikhon established the All-Russian Church Commission to assist the starving. In 1922, this commission was dissolved by the authorities, and the funds raised were confiscated. In 1928, church-wide charity was banned. Depriving the Church of effective mechanisms to mitigate the complex social situation in Russian society was one of the reasons for the political and economic cataclysms of the early twentieth century.

In the late 80s of the XX century the state recognized the need to provide citizens with the opportunity to proactively participate in social assistance, seeing in this not only a way to partially exempt the state budget from social spending, but also one of the means of forming civil society. Several funds were created that were supposed to cover the entire territory of the state with their activities: the Culture Fund, the Children's Fund, the Charity and Health Fund. In the following years, a large number of smaller charitable foundations and organizations appeared.

For seven decades, all religious organizations and associations represented on the territory of the former Union were forcibly deprived of the opportunity to engage in mercy. It takes years of joint work of state social protection bodies and church organizations in close cooperation with other non-governmental organizations to restore non-state social infrastructure that can take on a share of social responsibility for the fate of the most vulnerable groups of the population. The first steps in this direction are connected with the activities of the Department for Church Philanthropy and Social Ministry of the Moscow Patriarchate formed in January 1991 in accordance with the definition of His Holiness the Patriarch and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. In addition, many deeds of mercy and charity are carried out at the level of dioceses, monasteries, parishes, fraternities, and sisterhoods [13].

Modern conditions of social development open up great opportunities and broader prospects for the Russian Orthodox Church to develop new forms of active social activity, as evidenced by the Federal Law «On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations» adopted on September 26, 1997 [14]. So, in accordance with paragraph 1 of Article 18 of the Law, «religious organizations have the right to carry out charitable activities both directly and through the establishment of charitable organizations». At the same time, the state is ready «to provide assistance and support to the charitable activities of religious organizations, as well as their implementation of socially significant cultural and educational programs and events» (Section 3 of Article 18 of the Federal Law). Thus, the church received a legislative basis for its charitable activities.

So, in the post-perestroika years, church charity began to revive. The church received the legislative basis for its charitable activities. A synodic department for church philanthropy and social service has been established at the Church. It should be noted that the church is doing significant work to provide charitable assistance to those in need. So, in each diocese there are from 2 to 5 charity canteens. In the medical field, a significant number of healthcare institutions collaborate with church institutions - churches and chapels operate at hospitals, sisterhoods and various Orthodox medical societies are created. In our country, there are several dozen church almshouses (nursing homes) with 10-30 inhabitants in each. The activity of Orthodox shelters for minors is reviving. A separate topic is charitable assistance to drug addicts and alcoholics. Each diocese has a corresponding department. Significant is the help of the church to prisoners. Modern religious charity organizations are actively mastering «secular» technologies: a project approach, systematic reporting. Interaction and cooperation with secular NGOs is gradually developing. They, of course, have a lot in common: first of all, care for those who need help. The Russian state has recently equalized the rights of religious benefactors with secular ones. The new law on state support for socially oriented NGOs enshrines the provision according to which religious charitable organizations can equally claim to receive state financial, property and consulting support.

Orthodox charity is carried out in the following areas:

- work in public institutions, providing assistance in hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, etc. (carried out by charitable fraternities and sisterhoods);
- the creation of their own structures for the implementation of social programs - hospitals, almshouses, educational, rehabilitation centers, hotels, designed to work with various social categories of the population;
- implementation of various programs (medical, children's, educational, etc.); the development of the Orthodox service «Mercy» - helping others and those in need [15].

## II. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. Objectives of the study

During the study, the following tasks were solved:

- to study the historiography of the issue of mercy and charity in world religions;
- to explore the history of the emergence, formation, and spread of charity in Christianity;
- to designate the historical situation against which the social doctrine of Christianity has formed;
- to identify the features of the formation of the concept of mercy in Orthodoxy;
- to consider those aspects of Orthodox ethics that have influenced the formation of the concept of mercy;
- to define the phenomenon of mercy in Orthodoxy as the interconnection of theory and practice.

### B. Theoretical and methodological basis of the study

The article is written at the intersection of sciences: philosophy, religious studies, cultural studies, psychology, history, ethics and is based on a holistic systematic approach to the problem of moral values of world religions, revealing the characteristics of mercy and love in the social doctrine of Christianity. The leading approach to the study of this problem is the use of the classical comparative-historical method, including synchronous and diachronist analysis. The methodology of cultural analysis is complex and includes a cultural-historical analysis, a comparatively descriptive method. The article also uses general scientific and proper cultural methods and approaches.

### C. Research Base

The factual basis of the study was Holy Scripture, which outlines a fairly wide range of social problems, in accordance with which the basic forms and principles of mercy, justice, and beneficence were defined: feed the hungry, drink the thirsty, dress the naked, accept the wanderers, visit the sick, and come to prisoners [16]. The Bible encourages believers to take care of widows [17], orphans [18], not to turn away from sinners, teach those who lack knowledge, and advice doubters, comfort the suffering, suffer injustice, forgive offenders, and pray for friends and enemies [19]. All this is included in the concept of «social ministry of Christian denominations».

## III. RESULTS

The article sets out the foundations of the moral values of Christianity, gives general ideas about the theory and practice of public assistance and support to various categories of the population.

Religion is an amazingly rich, diverse cultural phenomenon, and its history itself is an interesting and colorful layer of the general history of mankind. The formation of personality always involves the perception of a particular value system, certain moral and ethical principles. World religions carry the

richest moral potential, spiritual culture, and historical, social, worldview, pedagogical and psychological knowledge.

Since ancient times, society has been familiar with life situations in which individuals, small and large social groups are in need, poor, helpless and helpless. In the history of all peoples, these social phenomena represented more or less acute social problems. They remain so in our time, since in many countries of the world, including Russia, poverty, need and helplessness remain the lot of a significant part of the population.

Charity is one of the main social forms of solving such problems and a special area of modern social life. It represents the answers to the objectively emerging challenges and questions of society, the solution of which is of substantial theoretical and practical interest. Charity arises in the context of the formation of human society, the formation of basic social institutions as a tradition of helping old, sick, disabled, children, people who are in trouble and who are unable to overcome it on their own. It existed before the formation of national and world religions, and with the emergence of the latter came into them an organic part.

So, the Christian doctrine of charity is an integral part of the social and ethical doctrine of the church and is based on the ideas of Christian theology, religious anthropology and philosophy. It is based on a Christian understanding of the ideas of good, love of one's neighbor, mercy and justice, which constitute the doctrinal (conceptual) core of this teaching. Its essence is expressed in the idea that God is the absolute focus of good, mercy and justice, i.e. he himself is good, love, mercy and justice and their source: he creates well, love, mercy and justice, which are the goal of human aspirations and a means of approaching God. Fortunately, love for one's neighbor, mercy and justice from a theological point of view are expressed in two respects: in a person's relationship with God (vertical section) and in a person's relationship with a person (horizontal section). Based on this, all the main directions of Christianity recognize that these categories are relevant to all people, for the Divine manifestations in relation to man (vertical section) are a model (model) for the relationship of people among themselves (horizontal section). In a horizontal section, in the earthly world, the final solution to social problems is associated with the distribution of goods, requiring the manifestation of love for one's neighbor, mercy, and justice. And only if this condition is met, according to the Christian point of view, will salvation be possible in the kingdom of heaven.

The main differences between Orthodox ideas and charity practices are the following:

Orthodoxy places particular emphasis on the fact that man himself is the source of social ills; the ways of his salvation are only open, not preordained and depend on the choice of man's free will. In the triad of love, mercy, charity, selfless love, which comes to forgiveness, predominates. There is no pragmatic aspect in understanding mercy; justice is understood to a greater extent as righteousness (vertical section - attitude to God), and love basically has a conciliar (collectivist) principle.

In the middle Ages, right up to the 18th century, a common occurrence was the veneration of the poor and holy fools.

Charitable activities in Russia from the time of the baptism of Russia to the 17th century were primarily of a public character and parish and monastery localization, during the reign of Peter the Great, the matter of public contempt acquired a state character and came under strict state control. The revival of church charity proper began in 1905 and in an organizational form practically disappeared after 1917. In the 1990s, a revival of the charitable and charitable activities of the Russian Orthodoxy of the parish and extra-parish type began.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Even a fragmentary retrospective examination of the religious and philosophical premises and traditions of mercy, justice, charity shows that they are universal values with a deep moral and humanistic meaning associated with the formation of human spirituality. Compassionate practice arose long before the emergence of organized religious and state structures, and with the advent of the latter, it became one of the most important areas of their social policy aimed at ensuring the stability of society, establishing social justice, and preventing social conflicts. Over time, this activity received religious consecration. It is enshrined in the canons and commandments of all religions. Charitable activities have always been one of the most important areas of activity of religious organizations of various directions, which have accumulated vast experience in charitable activities that can be counted for many centuries.

A study of the religious and philosophical prerequisites for the formation of the concepts of mercy and justice, which are key in social service, allowed us to conclude that since ancient times, mankind has been reflecting on these problems, and they tried to translate their vision of a just society into a practical plane through a certain way motivated charitable activities. With the emergence and development of religious and philosophical systems, the concepts of justice, mercy, charity receive their religious and philosophical justification, similar in many ways, regardless of confession or philosophy school. Historical realities, the current socio-economic situation both in Russia and abroad pose new questions for religious organizations, the answers to which they are called upon to find in the way of social service. This is the solution of interethnic problems, and the education of the principles of tolerance and freedom of conscience, moral and spiritual foundations, without which it is impossible to build a developed civil society. And along this path - the ways of social ministry of various religious and non-religious organizations - interfaith cooperation, dialogue between religious and non-religious (secular) worldviews are possible and necessary, and on the basis of such

interactions - the creation of various councils, foundations, societies, associations designed to really help socially unprotected and disadvantaged citizens, regardless of their confessional, national, ethnic, racial, affiliation.

#### V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results and conclusions of this study bring to a new level of understanding the phenomenon of moral values of Christianity, are intended for students, graduate students and teachers of higher educational institutions, as well as for a wide range of readers interested in cultural studies and religious studies.

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