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**THE OPTIMISTIC DIMENSION  
IN CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOX PASTORAL CARE.  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIRECTIONS**

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The vision of a beautiful and good world, a characteristic of the Christian religion, comes as a solution to the “depression” of modern times. Humans have within their nature a tendency towards spiritual fulfilment, through the intermediary of faith and good deeds. Hope for a better world, be it actual or eschatological, is a virtue which develops an optimistic idea of the world, a wish for communication and an impulse for acting upon it. Positive psychology rediscovers the optimistic natural dimension of humans and the mechanisms through which this can be achieved. The Orthodox worship can be considered a similar mechanism if it preserves free spirit and ludic engagement in meeting with God, different from the stress fuelled by instrumentalisation of liturgy in an act of magical kind. Those who take part in the worship are filled with optimism and hope, the motive behind which study maintains a pastoral Orthodox liturgy, based on direct experience and active participation.

**Keywords:** Church, optimism, Orthodox pastoral care, positive psychology, worship.

**ПОНЯТИЕ ОПТИМИЗМА  
В СОВРЕМЕННОМ ПРАВОСЛАВНОМ ДУШЕПОПЕЧЕНИИ.  
АНТРОПОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ НАПРАВЛЕННОСТЬ**

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Видение мира добрым и красивым, характерное для Христианства, выступает способом преодоления современной «депрессии». В человеческой природе заложено стремление к духовному наполнению посредством веры и добрых дел. Надежда на лучший мир, реальный или эсхатологический, представляет собой добродетель, развивающую оптимистическую картину мира, желание и стремление к коммуникации. Позитивная психология

раскрывает природный оптимизм в людях и механизмы его действия. Православное богослужение может рассматриваться как аналогичный механизм, если оно сохраняет свободный дух и живую вовлеченность в общение с Богом, отличное от стресса, подпитываемого сведением литургии к некому магическому действию. Участники богослужения исполнены оптимизма и надежды, что является ведущей характеристикой православной литургии, основанной на личном опыте и активном участии.

**Ключевые слова:** Церковь, оптимизм, православное душепопечение, позитивная психология, богослужение.

### **Depression of modern times and the need for a positive view of life**

It can be affirmed that the disease of our century is depression. A person who suffers from this disposition feels sad, discouraged, lacking in energy and motivation. In general, it affects the majority of activities and as a result everything is seen in a negative light. Exemplary of this is Tolstoy's confession: "The truth lay in this, that life had no meaning for me. Every day of life, every step in it, brought me nearer the edge of a precipice, whence I saw clearly the final ruin before me. To stop, to go back, were alike impossible; nor could I shut my eyes so as not to see the suffering that alone awaited me, the death of all in me, even to annihilation" [43, p. 28-29]. The major Russian writer manifested an existential crisis, in which he felt that everything was disintegrating and that there was no longer a purpose to life.

On a social level, a negative aspect of depression is withdrawal from society. Those who suffer avoid interaction with people they know, refuse any kind of invitation and engage in dialogue with great difficulty. In a few words, it can be said that life decreases in intensity and that the world becomes individualised and fragmented. Yet the integration of all people through religion was a fundamental value, manifested as much through a permanent availability for those experiencing suffering, the patient rejoicing in careful care [24]. From the beginning, Christianity had this capacity to reintroduce the person affected by physical or psychological illnesses into the community and making them a participant in their own healing.

In this difficult context, the role of religion is that which “understands” human problems and offers remedies. *In terms of depression, its symptoms can be reduced by participating in religious worships.* One study which analyses the behaviour of congregations in the Catholic Church supports the fact that the number suffering from depression is lower among those who participate in religious worship [21]. It appears that religious manifestations offer a preventative solution for mental illness, which cannot be replaced by social support and assistance.

Christianity, as well as Buddhism, Islam and Judaism transfer positive psychology to the individual or society engaged in spiritual or religious experiences [34]. Those who partake in these Masses have the possibility to change their perception of the world, of getting a new tone and of awakening a “thirst for life”. It is a first step in pastoral religion, that of stimulation and of “provocation” to action, of creating a dimension of community and of discovering a direction in life.

Mankind has reached a point in which what matters is external, negating the interior, as in that which is essential for a person. Internal motivations are conditioned by way of life and it is not then surprising that optimism can be hidden behind utilitarianism or consumerism. Based on the notion of “having it all”, optimism can be an illusion. Without internal motivation, one can lose all vitality for all existence, stability and harmony. The influenced by Platonism, Christian spirituality has often maintained this separation between the interiority and exteriority [41], although mental integrity goes *through practical experience of the body*, even when the path of contemplation is followed.

Religion is neither the expression of a blind start nor the fruit of an abstract reflection, but seeks to reconfigure life. It conjugates rational aspects with sensitive ones in daily experiences to *overcome* its limitations. Faith and religion have oftentimes been studied from this perspective, as generators of sense, permitting individuals to move beyond their limits for a greater vision of reality. Yet, in current postmodern times, it seems that we have more to do with a religion lacking sense and faith [33].

If mysticism is perceived as the height of religious experience, this aligns itself very closely to the definition of optimism [28]: persistent positive changes in attitude and behaviour, increased sensitivity and love for others, a new and enriched appreciation for life, and a motivation to live. Byzantine religion and its worships are an *invitation* to life, providing a meaning of existing, filled with optimism [36]. These were some of the roles of religion, which have been lost over time; yet, mankind is in search of a meaning for spirituality [2] which opens a dialogue on the natural *need* to be an optimist.

Therefore, developing positive emotions is realised through identifying a positive meaning [35]. Religion offers its faithful a world vision which helps them to discover this positive sense in daily happenings as well as in major life events. The religious experience develops positive emotions such as joy, serenity, worship, rediscovery or hope. These qualities should influence a person's mentality, making them more creative and integrative. In other words, positive religious emotions take the function of adaptation, similar to the optimistic dimension of life. This is integral given the existence of unnatural derivative phenomena from religion which propagates a false optimism or illusion, which refuses to identify transcendent meaning *in* the world. Some religious cults search for spiritual enlightenment whether through a resigned or passive attitude, awaiting the imminent kingdom, whether through an aggressive and revolutionary attitude in which the Apocalypse legitimises violence towards people [1, p. 93].

Yet, the religious crisis can be identified at a more profound level: even if Christian theology has made timely efforts in transmitting positive messages and for encouraging a better vision of the world (the hallmark in this meaning being the ecotheological movement [11]), the echoes among mankind have not risen to the level of the waiting (in practice, many times, optimism has transformed into a pseudo religion, into a "positive thinking", taking the place of traditional religion). The question which persistently arises not only among theologians is why the theological message was not received, was not assimilated and not put into practice by those who declare themselves Christian?

This study has its foundation in a particular intuition, connected in general terms to the anthropology of motivation and knowledge: that which is at the basis of human motivations, of positive intuitions about the future and of estimates which call to action moving through the perceived body and profound emotions [19]. Optimism means having ideas of the future and according to psychological studies; these are connected to a history of waiting and motivational models [9].

As such, a study which treats optimism as a specific element of the religious being should also encapsulate the study of practices and rituals. In fact, religious worship have represented from the beginning a synthesis between that which is known and the unknown, between the natural and the supernatural, between human and divine, establishing a sense of harmony and order. In this positive vision of the world one's life is mapped out and makes sense. How can this be achieved?

### **Scientific context offered by positive psychology**

In this paragraph I propose to highlight in brief the scientific panorama in which this article finds itself. It can be said that two major directions exist, which can be paradoxically both antagonistic as they are complementary. Firstly, there exists a certain need to be optimistic which comes from human nature. A recently published study shows that optimism is universal because it develops in both poor and rich countries. 89% of study participants think their future will be better and tend to look at the "full side of the glass". Researchers have realized that individual factors such as age, monthly income, education, sex, etc. have a lower impact on optimism than originally thought, and national factors such as GDP and life expectancy have no impact on optimism [26]. Secondly, this optimism is dependent on the exterior, it grows and can lead to optimism of a religious nature [30], in the sense that it becomes an ideology which refutes any commentary and becomes removed from reality. Some authors have said that positive thinking, with all its implications, including eliminating the possibility of failure, has led to the global crisis of the early 2008 [15].

Optimism, even if it is of major importance in human life, has not long been considered a subject matter for study. Even moreso in the Orthodox religion,

optimism, with some specific exceptions, is missing from theological analysis and discussion. More recently this subject has been considered from a psychological viewpoint, that which deemed that it can be an *object* to study and therefore measurable.

Positive psychology is a recent movement which stems from the fundamental idea that optimism is a characteristic unique to the human species [32]. Martin Seligman, the founder of this movement, highlights the fact that it is a potential quality of humans which can be *learned* and taught [39]. In general terms, it can be said that it is more than reasoning, that it is an attitude, a way of perceiving things. Though reduced to human's natural level, the American psychologist's vision shows us that optimism is not a fixed quality, but one which can be modified through various experiences. It can be stated that, as such, optimism is made up of two dimensions: the one which is natural, biological and the one which is socio-cultural.

Another author who insists upon the fact that optimism is natural to humans is Tali Sharot [40]. The psychologist of Israeli descent declares that humans have an inclination towards seeing things in an optimistic light in order to realise a selection of information to their advantage. In other words, at a subconscious level there exists a tendency to underestimate the probability of having negative experiences and of overestimating faith with the occurrence of positive experiences. Even at when people are presented with statistical data, they continue that negative experiences will not befall them. One example is marriage nowadays: although the divorce rate is more than 50%, people continue to get married [40, p. 186-201]. Why this "trick"? Researcher Sharot mentions a certain psychological "illusion" with an adaptive scope, in the sense that this is what leads us to a belief in the future as well as a major adaptive function [7]. The illusion of a better future assists in the elimination of anxiety and stress. Yet, this rationalisation is incomplete because it is difficult to have a concept of optimism without a concrete dimension of good.

The final frontier in the study of optimism is found in the study of the brain. In short, neurosciences applied to optimism have discovered through functional images of the brain that this quality is closely connected to the activation of a specific neural

mechanism. More precisely, it seems that humans possess a particular and unique frontal development of the brain (frontal convolutions) implied in the positive view of the world. It is the ultimate argument through which the existence of the optimist as object is highlighted, as well as its natural human dimension. Also from the anatomical spectrum, very important are the genetic researches, which argue that self-esteem, sense of control over one's own life and optimism depend on a gene capable of avoiding stress [42].

One of the problems which positive psychology is yet to resolve is the limits of this personal progress. If it exists in human nature for one to be happy, optimistic and grateful, these experiences are not the only ones which a person experiences in daily life. From an adaptive point of view, it can be dangerous for humans to not maintain a certain balance, one that is realistic but full of balance, for this optimism to bear fruit. In other words, it is dangerous for self-taught optimism to hide or to neglect the existence of dangers or suffering.

### **Christianity as hope and optimism**

Perhaps many would hastily affirm that optimism is an unconditional quality of religion. This is due to that fact that it is confused with hope, one of life's fundamental virtues. Yet the two can cross over under certain conditions. In a recent musing [23], Pope Francis very clearly affirms that Christian hope does not identify itself with optimism. If the latter is a fundamental quality of humans, that is a tone or a state of well-being, hope is the putting into practice of this state of being. It is not sufficient for a Christian to be optimistic; there is also a need for a force to free them and to sustain them for a new life. It is what is called hope, which comes from Christ Himself. Belief and faith in the growth of the spirit can clearly mean a simple serene tone, a simple type of optimistic attitude, yet there is need for a scope and a real *transformation* of a person in order for it to become religious optimism [5].

The difference between optimism and hope has not only been remarked upon in the religious environment [4]. Optimism is generic and does not necessarily refer to a view of the future; on the other hand, hope is more closely related to a scope and a *relationship*. To highlight life's troubles and orientating belief towards the future,

there is a need for a power which lends a transparency to time [14, p. 197], which brings the future into the present and at the same time shields it from material reduction. This power is a meeting, an anticipated feeling of that which is yet to come. As such, in my opinion, contemporary Orthodox pastoral care is a liturgical pastoral, an experience and a meeting with God. The supply of optimism and the generating of constant hope, even from the beginnings of Christianity, in this direct relationship with the Divine through the liturgy: “The Orthodox thought of God is worship, even if it is not realized in the time of worship [...]. In the order of cult, the event of meeting with God is continually taking place, as the depths of their experiments are made in the back of a river. In the worship we speak to God singing, for singing only gives expression to the experience of the word above the word. In the Song, our being becomes sensitive to the experience of the mystery, it is abducted by the enthusiasm produced in it by the experience of the mystery, the Spirit of life, and finds the form of communicating this enthusiastic experience. Singing frees the words from their limited intellectual meanings, rendering them fit to the ineffable life of the lived mystery” [13, p. 736-737].

Under another registry, hope is a force which helps in overcoming life's difficulties. It simultaneously encompasses faith, humility, as well as vulnerability. In an opposing sense, optimism is often arrogant, false or egoistical [25, p. 29-30]. As such, the optimism of Christian pastoral relates to hope, that which experiments, without hiding suffering or despair. If optimism can at times be superficial, Christian hope is a conviction that the universe has a positive final scope and significance. Christians have a positive vision because they are convinced that God is the reason for all things and that he guides that which occurs. That is why Andreev, in my opinion, is a little forced, that “only theism, and in particular its complete form - the true Christian religion – offers the most orderly, perfect, profound, comprehensive, reasoned and brilliant, Optimistic and alive conception of the world” [3, p.76]. It is important to note that hope and concerns are within the antinomy of human nature. The report is inversely proportional: personal concerns are reduced when hope in being part of another world is increased.



Christianity sees a paradigm shift through differing approaches to world problems and in the face of evil [16, p.139]. The ancient world, of Platonic origin, suffered a fundamental mutation resulting from Christian principles of Creation. The Holy Fathers of the Christian church want to reconnect materialism with evil; more so, the world represents a school for the soul, a place in which a person can perceive and contemplate God Himself among the beauty of the world [6]. It is what can be called Christian optimism, which has its direct origins in the biblical reference: the created world is very good (Genesis 1:33).

Trials encountered by humans are innumerable and these can be physical or spiritual. Even though this modifies the entire human balance and shakes a person, the message of Christ is an optimistic one, believing in our escape from these trials and from sin, in order to acquire eternal life and happiness. Father Dumitru Stăniloae, reading Marcus Eremita affirms that the heart in which Christ lives from Baptism can not be opened by another aside from Christ Himself and understanding hope, that is through a seeing hope of those which are unseen, or from another life. Only then does the heart truly open, no longer being ruled by worry for self” [14, p. 199]. Those who see only the material world are often bored and pessimistic, yet those who see a world beyond that, are optimistic despite their condition [45, p. 95-96].

Christianity is a religion based on joy and hope being that the central event of its theology goes beyond the negative limits of existence, that is, death. *Resurrection*, being the victory of life over death and the expression of applause from the disciples who witnessed Christ resurrected, is the foundation of the Orthodox faith and that which is permanently relived by every Christian. It is an explosion of joy which is passed down from generation to generation through the prism of repeating the Holy Liturgy. The Resurrection is a guarantee which lends to the hope of salvation [13, p. 737]. Each Liturgy of the Mass is the proclamation of these joys. The entire Christian church’s following is filled with the Resurrection and with hope and Orthodox masses are a pre-emptive way of experiencing meetings with God. The liturgy is an eschatological presence.

The moderation of optimism in orthodoxy also comes from the Faithfull's liturgical experience. These spiritual manifestations are in fact encounters with God, in which one gets acquainted with the divine presence. Humans become a part of God, they become a shareholder of His Being, and they discover the helplessness and unhappiness of a solitary life and feel the hope of His fulfilment. The faithful are optimistic for the dialogue of salvation which humans discover and carry with the risen Christ, yet it is an optimism which in tandem discovers human shortcomings and the need for perfection [13, p. 737]. An edifying example for this positive aspect of the faithful an holy icons, humans possibility to become saintly: "through deepening ones dialogue with God and His signs, a doctrine of greatness which awaits people, a doctrine of hope for every believer, a taste of pre-emptive hope. Icons and hymns addressing the saints tensely hold believers between the receiving of, and the promise of perfection, on the road to uncovering ontological dialogue with God, which is an eschatological path. The eschatological perspective of the congregation projects a light of optimism over present life" [13, p. 737].

### **Embodied optimism in the ludic dimension of the liturgical experience**

One of the main characteristics of Orthodox Christianity is the centrality of the experience. Before any rational formula or dogmatic concept, to be religious signifies an encounter with God physically mediated in liturgy ordained by the Church. In a paradoxical sense, there exists in the Orthodox Church simultaneously two dynamics which appear to exclude: the sobriety of asceticism and the explosion of joy of the liturgy [10, p. 50]. Any moment of joy is preceded by a period of withdrawal and fasting, while any interval of limitation is fulfilled in the joy of the meeting. It can be said that optimism is positioned among these struggles between quite and joy. Christians experiment with true hope and builds their expectations in need: optimism powered solely by exuberance can drive one towards an illusionary vision of the future.

Optimism associated with hope, is a Christian virtue which is the basis of spiritual life; it is a profound human quality, generated and trained in an amazing context. From a phenomenological point of view it is an ante-predicative, a

disposition, a “sacred instinct” which wholly enlightens life. The thesis being maintained in this study is that religion has lost of its power to generate optimism as a result of the practical experience with which it is associated has lost its original meaning. The liturgies are a channel of communication for Christian teachers, yet it needs to be action generating hope and optimism through a physical intermediary, above or before any verbal intervention. In a certain sense, optimism reflects general expectations with a view to quality, towards a different hope, which focuses more on touching on certain personal scopes, therefore conscious and rational [8].

In liturgical camps, the hallmark is the connection between Christian church practices and the ludic dimension, realised by Guardini [18]. Being one of the first Western theologians who highlighted the close connection between liturgy and play, like artwork and observed that religious practices, similarly to games, do not have a specific purpose. Coming back to optimism, this seems to be finality in itself, a wish and a quality of action which eliminates a specific report of a relationship between cause and effect. As such, optimism exists in masses for as long as these are free expressions of faith, that is does not focus on something definite, neglecting the details of the act in itself. Optimism is a quality which is acquired and improves alongside other intentional qualities.

Everything unravels under the umbrella of symbolic vision, which asks for a hermeneutic of significance. We find ourselves otherwise in a symbolic world which asks for participation in the first person, yet optimism seems to thrive in this “disinterested” experience. Byzantine theologians commented on the decadence of this aspect of the Christian liturgy, focusing on what is real and what is rational [38]. Liturgical symbolism is necessary for liturgical participation as well as the conversion of believers. In a separate study looking at The Holy Eucharist [37], Schmemmann highlights that if a real transformation exists in the Oriental liturgy it is due to a real change in the church, that being those who actively participate.

Therefore the liturgy is a mechanism which generates and governs optimism. Unfortunately, with the passing of time, a point of literary transcription of the ritual has been reached, which has significantly weakened the action itself. More so in

Western Christianity, the congregation has transformed into a reference to the Scriptures of a theoretical and didactic nature. Moral teachings have overshadowed any form of bright liturgical action by the population. Natural elements present in liturgy have been gradually eliminated without being of benefit to people, as it is known that contact with nature has positive consequences over one in a physical, psychological, social and spiritual sense.

Theologians regard acts of liturgy more as an act of prayer, eliminating the anthropological depth. It seems that nowadays everything is overshadowed by a forgetting of the reality of rituals as *performance* in the name of spirituality without body. The same vice continues within theology of attributing everything to God and divine actions, forgetting anthropological mediations based on divine actions, forgetting that only a certain embodiment allows access to the divine world.

Acts of faith should be an encounter with God, of mind and body, which awakens attachment in the face of an important figure, belief and optimism in an *accompanied* future. Belief in God gives certain psychological benefits which serve as an antidote in the face of fear and anxiety [22]. A number of empirical studies have shown that this is indeed possible in geographical areas which are predominantly Christian: an inner feeling of control [20], believe in personal competence [46], an active approach, flexibility in problem solving [29], optimism and hope in both the long and the short term [27]. Anthropological studies of acts of worship demonstrate a real “grammar” in which the ritual is associated with play. Once the similarities are recognised between ritual and play, we must establish that there is no danger in affirming that in the absence of this *Ludus implicit*, Christianity suffers from a lack of power to create hope and optimism.

Optimism acquires biological connotations and places itself in a “gestalt orbit”, where each organ generates and is filled with a sentiment, of an emotion, of an intuition and mostly of a special motivation for taking action. Optimism is also a physical characteristic, embodied in an intelligent and sensitive body.

The criteria though which religion maintains a natural optimism, as an internal drive of humans, is the offering of a positive experience which can govern optimism.

The ritual is a positive psycho-biological context which has the main scope to increase optimism through bodily experience, preceding any rational thoughts. The Orthodox liturgy can be considered a principle of optimism and a paradigm in which to affirm a positive world view. It holds together ritual and doctrine, experience and theology, body and mind and transforms experience into a *predicative* before any dogma [4]. Otherwise, acts of Byzantine worship are a model for the entire universe, a sacrament of order with a prescriptive and normative value [17; 47].

The Holy Liturgy, central to the existence of the Orthodox Church, is the place of the anthropic action in which the whole cosmos transforms to praise God [44]. The free model denotes a bodily intelligence, an “optimistic mind” which is created in participants. The Christian Byzantine liturgy seems to keep count of the fact that first impressions remain in the body’s perceptions: the “welcoming” buildings of the church that creates ideas, music which “invite” to harmony and resonance, the spirit of the icon-*empsychos graphe*, which “kidnaps” with its beauty and sends to contemplation, the perfume which “saves”, are some examples which lead us to believe that optimism is an aesthetical education of beauty. The Byzantine church maintained and insists on this lay on the senses and appears to base itself on an intelligent body only then when it wishes to transmit hope for the future.

### **Conclusion**

In the contemporary world, the sense of creating experiences, of awakening hope and for the spirit to be optimistic has been lost. This is the great sadness which we witness in our midst and within ourselves. There no longer exist worlds which are imaginary, alternative, and therefore the possibility of living profoundly no longer exists. Acts of liturgy need to be a pastoral and psychological instrument by generating hope and optimism [31], even though enormous experimental and ludic possibilities of acts of worship are extremely weakened in modern culture [12].

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