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## **Lev Shestov and Étienne Gilson: A Dialogue Against the Background of the Middle Ages**

The article is devoted to analysis of the invisible dialogue between the two greatest thinkers of the twentieth century - Lev Shestov and Etienne Gilson. This is a conversation on the topic of the middle Ages: its problems and its features.

Keywords: Shestov, Gilson, neo-Thomism, faith, truth.

Lev Shestov's interest in the medieval philosophy was determined by the fact that the major themes of his creativity were closely associated with problems of medieval philosophical thought. In this context, it is necessary to mention first of all the issues of cognition, the relationship between faith and reason, salvation, the problem of good and evil, etc. Lev Shestov elaborated his final understanding of the medieval thought after the acquaintance with the works of Adolf von Harnack and Étienne Gilson. And if one considers the issue of synthesis of Greek wisdom and Christianity, it does not matter for Shestov how it happens: whether there is the process of Hellenization of Christianity (Harnack), or Christianization of Hellenism (Gilson). One cannot distinguish any comprehensive and objective study of the medieval philosophy performed by Shestov. He never set up such problems. In the works of thinkers of one or another era, Shestov sought answers to his deepest questions, and saw the themes of consideration in which he was interested himself.

It is important that St. Anselm's "credo ut intelligam" is not acceptable for Shestov. After all, this statement manifests that faith and reason cannot contradict each other; that reason leads to realization of the necessity of faith. By contrast,

Shestov indicates that we certainly can realize something, but understanding will not add faith as such. Faith, for Shestov, is an insight which cannot be prepared or planned [4. p. 39 – 40]. And if the neo-Thomist position does not try to delimit the competence of faith and reason, seeking their complementarity, then Shestov sharply distinguishes them, and even opposes faith to reason. And if one considers the debate of Étienne Gilson and Lev Shestov in the context of problems of the Russian philosophy, Gilson's views are quite similar to the positions of V. Solovyov and S. Trubetskoy [1. p.136].

The undisguised truth does not rely on anything, it does not prove anything, it is not justified to anyone; and yet in our mind it becomes a justified, proven and self-evident truth [5. p. 214].

Shestov interprets “The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy” and asserts that its central idea is as follows: the more true philosophy becomes a philosophy, the more it becomes Christian.

Shestov is impressed by Gilson's objectivity in issues which are key for him, namely, in the question which the French thinker raises: is the Christian philosophy possible without the existence of Greek philosophy [5.p. 217]. Gilson supports Gilson in terms of the idea that not only the Middle Ages, but also modern people have inherited the basic philosophical problems, rational principles and all the techniques of our thinking from the Greeks [5. p. 220 – 221].

Shestov, nevertheless, is a thinker of one idea, and in Gilson's works he focuses on those issues that have always been interesting for him: the themes of tasting the fruit from the tree of good and evil; Tertullian's opposition of Athens and Jerusalem. For that matter, Gilson does not believe that such protests could and should restrain the medieval philosophy in its aspiration to transform the truth of revelation into the truth of rational knowledge. Gilson believes that neither the prophet Isaiah, nor Paul can be a support for those who dispute the possibility of rational Judeo-Christian philosophy; and the apostle Paul saw them as only the way to salvation, and not to cognition. However, Shestov disagrees with him on this matter. He believes that it is not only an objection to Tertullian's opposition of

Athens and Jerusalem, but rather its interpretation. Shestov summarizes that what is wisdom for Athens is madness for Jerusalem [5. p. 229]. Here he sees the famous “*credo guia absurdum*”.

Shestov does not agree with Gilson’s statement that the Greek philosophers were unfamiliar with monotheism. The Russian thinker draws attention to the fact that the Greek thought from the very beginning of its existence struggled to find a single principle in the universe. He asserts: “If it could be proven as twice two makes four that the Greek philosophers were monotheists, this would not mean that they anticipated Biblical revelation” [5. p. 260]. In one of his letters to Lazarev (August 23, 1934) Shestov summarizes Gilson’s ideas which he does not share. He cannot accept the fact that according to Gilson, scholastic philosophy was Biblical. However, it is also undeniable for him that the Fathers of the Church displayed great attempts to overcome what the Greeks called “knowledge” [1. p. 129].

The one God which we discovered in the universe has as much to do with the God of the Bible as a barking dog with the *Canis Major*. Reason perceives the single principle; it needs to find someone who, as Blaise Pascal wrote regarding Descartes, will be the first to push everything going on: the reason has to understand.

But faith – again, of course, the faith of the Holy Scriptures – is not concerned with understanding or evidence. It needs something else, something that excludes every “understanding” and all the “evidence”. Shestov constantly draws attention to the fact that Gilson declares “*la bangueroute de la sagesse greque*”, and in the unity with the apostolic “what is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14.23) – this is actually already a rebuke and a stern warning. The Greeks await rescue from their knowledge-based wisdom, but they will find death, while the salvation is in faith, and only in faith [4. p. 264].

Shestov is convinced that medieval philosophy essentially had to abandon the idea of the necessity of bringing the idea about the created truth into the world. After all, it can be assumed that the world was created by God. But the truths are not created; they exist without Him, as did before him and will do after all. For

Shestov, Gilson's thesis of "radical optimism" is very noticeable in this book, when the cognition metaphysics of Genesis refuses to see the reality which cannot be denied in the notion of "this fact". It raises the question as to what is a "fact" and "reality" in its own way. And the main question may be determined as the understanding of whether or not these concepts possess the finality which they are attributed to [5. p. 282].

But within the views of Gilson, Shestov also perceives something very close to himself. The most important moment for Shestov, very accurately remarked by Gilson, points to the fact that our concepts "creak at the seams when we attempt to cram them into the content of the Scriptures" [2. p. 33 – 34].

The personality of Luther which in Gilson's work is opposed to scholasticism, for Shestov has always been very controversial. It is undisputed fact that Luther's doctrine is a complete contrast to the objectives of scholasticism. However, Shestov, just as Gilson, can say that a consistent Lutheran is a "rarissima avis" [5. p. 297]. Nevertheless, Luther like no other tries to move away from knowledge. He is afraid of it, and his whole being frantically aspires to faith. The reason which we believe is a natural conductor, actually leads us to death. The law we rely upon only leads to multiplication of criminal knowledge.

Work on the analysis of Gilson's views very fascinated Shestov. In a letter to B. Schlözer (November 3, 1934), he writes: "... a huge amount of material is accumulated; I do not know how everything fits in one article, even in a large one. And I do not know how to arrange it, so that the readers who are accustomed to the "evidence" could realize that the evidence does not prove anything and only destroys what is most important for a person" [1. p. 132].

Unfortunately, with these publications and the exchange of polite letters the close contact between the Russian thinker Lev Shestov and the young French philosopher and historian Etienne Gilson comes to an end. Hereafter, they went their own ways. And while Shestov is still more drawn to Jerusalem in the issue of commonality between Athens and Jerusalem, Gilson finds his own answer in this dilemma: "Rome" [1. p. 136].

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