The Language of Fullness and The Language of Emptiness: Dialogue Between the Russian Orthodox Church and Buddhism? A Paradox

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The first part of this title comes from the famous French orthodox theologian Olivier Clément (1921–2009). In the beginning rather critical of Buddhism, Clément later became an advocate of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. He sees the root of this dialogue in the fact that where Christianity perceives “the ocean of light beyond form, emerging from a personal Source,” this Source is, nevertheless, also understood as something “much deeper unknown than known,” as it is in Buddhism.

Here follow several quotes from Olivier Clément:

Thus our God must be called up not only by the language of fullness—Being as an overwhelming fullness—but also by the language of Emptiness (which was intuited by Buddhism and Taoism), in other words, by the language of Love. […] But this God, crucified on all evil of the world, precisely because he is God, never stops to overcome death—the root of evil—and hell, its empire […] The Holy Spirit […] opens up the infinite space of freedom here for us […] According to the Russian religious philosophers since Solov’ev, Florenskii, and Bulgakov […] the cosmic becoming and human history together constitute one gigantic process of ‘incarnation’ […] All eastern experiences of the divine and all western experiences of the human, once they open themselves up for each other and no longer work against each other, can find a place in the ‘divino-humanity’. […] Orthodox hesychasm (from the Greek hesychia, the silence and peace of union with God) knows methods that can be compared with those of Asia, in order to free oneself of mental idols, to purify the intellect of ‘thoughts’, to unify intelligence and the heart, using the rhythms of the body. Amazing exchanges will be necessary here.1

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I on Buddhism

The scope of these words carries with it a special intensity of meaning when seen against the background of Clément’s book *Conversations with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I*.2 There the importance of the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity is analyzed and discussed in depth. It is remarkable that the Ecumenical Patriarch, the most important figure of the entire Orthodox Church, displays the same openness about the same points named by Clément. He understands that westerners who are alienated from their own Christian tradition ‘find true serenity in Buddhism. They learn that there exist[s] a *dharma* (to use the Sanskrit word), a path of salvation, a world order; one could even call it Wisdom, almost in the Biblical sense of the word. And this *dharma*, not unlike the Decalogue, asks them not to kill, steal, or lie […].’3

Further, the Patriarch speaks positively about the Buddhist practice of meditation:

[This practice] of meditation […] allows us to discern the process of growth and finally to awaken ourselves. To awaken to the unique, ineffable reality […]. This type of asceticism, which is monastic, is similar to our own monastic asceticism. Hesychastic spirituality, ‘the art of arts and science of sciences’, also speaks of ignorance and of the passions, which begin with pride and avidity, with self-centeredness—*philautia*—which are all born from our hidden anguish when we are faced with the transitory nature of this world. And the methods to achieve this liberation from the ‘passions’ are similar: cleanse the mind of ‘thoughts’, achieve *apatheia*