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RELIGIOUS-TRANSCENDENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF HEALTH: METHODO-ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF (JUDEO-)CHRISTIANITY

ABSTRACT

Agreeing with Vladeta Jerotić's view that the sphere of religiosity, insofar as human life is concerned, is the most refined, the deepest, and the most sensitive of all spheres, the author seeks, through the example of Health, to demonstrate that the constant presence of God's Spirit in the human being — *neshamah* (נשמה) in Judaism, in the "nose" (and in Serbian *no-zdr(a)-va*), when man became man at God's command — is, according to Judeo-Christian belief, constitutive of both human freedom and love, that is, *freedo(m)love*.

The research therefore aims to offer a kind of introduction to the Judeo-Christian eschatology of Health, whose *linear circle* began in the Garden of Eden before the primordial sin, after which the *fall into Illness* occurred; and only with the appearance of Christ did it begin once again to *ascend* toward the ideal of primordial Health.

In this way, Waldenfels' (somewhat ironic) thesis that the head of the Church, or the Church itself, "takes care of the general mental health" *of all others* will be examined within a *method-ontological* framework.

KEYWORDS: Health, Transcendence, religion, Judeo-Christianity, *methodo-ontology*.

Introduction – *Methodo-Ontology* of Health and the *Head of the Church – the Caregiver of General Spiritual Health*

"*Here, from the wind of the Bible,*

I read healthy thoughts,

and the prophet Isaiah

watched over the cattle with me."

— Sergei Yesenin (1917–1918) (2009: 23)[1], translated for this article[2]

"In his *methodo-ontological* framework—whose guiding idea is the establishment 'of a *new and (even) freer – path-ontology*, that is, an *ontology of (thought) paths and journeys* that always leaves its routes open to all (its) possible travellers and never presupposes predetermined trajectories at the outset'—the author designates his primary object in four distinct ways: health, *health*, *Health*, and Health.[3]

The first designation refers to everyday or colloquial speech, which simultaneously constitutes the *input* for this study. The second term represents health placed within a philosophical or comparable discursive framework as a *methodo-ontologised* concept. The penultimate *Health* denotes its interpretation as understood by certain thinkers and creators,

[1] Italicised by the author V.T.

[2] Translated by S.B. No standard published English version of this excerpt could be reliably identified.

[3] The following sentences on methodo-ontology: "Uncertainty, attested by *the constitutive indeterminacy* of the problem, the path, and the goal, and by *the absolute unpredictability* of the final (practical) outcome—which characterises all journeys undertaken through it, as well as the sketches of all its possible trajectories—finds its conceptual and inspirational grounding precisely in the thought of the aforementioned Jewish–Lithuanian–French (meta)phenomenologist, whose philosophy articulates the ultimate form of freedom and openness toward otherness(es) and toward others as any (absolute) Other. Its paths are certainly something more and different than the 'motif of the intertwining of the Same and the Other', for they lead to the point at which the Odyssean trajectories of *leaving in order to return* intersect with the Abrahamic trajectories of *leaving never to return*" may be found in: Vuk Trnavac, Health of the Others: Essay of establishing one methodoontology of health. Master's thesis. Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, 2021, p. 12. Available at: http://remaster.ff.uns.ac.rs/?rad=3e700a399fc67e8b6fa47142507803bd Then: "This idea of *methodo-ontology* is also, to some extent, Rosenzweigian in orientation, similar to the way Dragan Prole describes the understanding of the true nature of the self in this thinker: '[...] an irregular trajectory that moves from the unknown toward the unknown.' [...] Such a *(methodo-)ontological* approach also anticipates the methodological and epistemological orientation later employed by Michel Serres, who used the concept of *Randonnée*—derived from the Old French *randon* (etymologically related to the English 'random'), originally meaning 'an animal that goes to the spring'—to explain the idea that knowledge and education constitute a journey, though not as movement through time but as movement through space. It represents a form of wandering, excursion, or expedition: a traversal and discovery of new paths, just as the aforementioned animal reaches the spring by a different trajectory each time, through manifold forms of otherness." In: ibid., pp. 11–12.

whereas Health—capitalised and without *italics*—signifies the transcendent concept of Health (Trnavac, 2023: 207–208)[4]."

It is precisely this final modality of Health, considered from a (Judeo)-Christian perspective, that forms the principal subject of the present study. With this in mind, it is necessary at the outset to ask whether—and to what extent—the following words of the contemporary German phenomenologist of *the foreign*, Bernhard Waldenfels, are in fact justified in their (somewhat ironic) tone: "Be it the head of the Church who takes care of general mental health, the prime minister who takes care of the common good, the influential voice of public opinion, the self-proclaimed interpreter of the spirit of the age—or the philosopher as '*functionary of humanity'*. Such advocates and spokespersons of the 'common spirit' lapse into logocentrism as soon as they conceal *the place from which they speak about the whole* and behave as [if — author's insertion] the whole itself were speaking through them" (Waldenfels, 2005: 99). Is it truly reasonable to deny people from different denominations of Christian communities the possibility of caring for such an important matter as general mental health, but certainly also spiritual, and even physical, *health of all others*?

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that the only relevant answer to this question is unequivocally negative and that it is indeed possible, as Yesenin suggests, to "from the wind of the Bible read healthy thoughts," and, drawing upon the teachings of the Holy Fathers of the Eastern Church as well as contemporary Orthodox-oriented authors such as Jean-Claude Larchet, Dmitry Alexandrovich Avdeev, and others, to *descend* far more *deeply* into the *ocean of mysteries* surrounding so significant a concept as Health.

Health in the *Bible*

6 "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 *Then your light shall break forth like the morning*, *Your healing shall spring forth speedily*[5], And your righteousness shall go before you; The

[4] Some of the instances in which, in the author's view, it is appropriate to employ this form include Marcus Aurelius' concept of the "Health of the Cosmos" (*gk. Κόσμον ὑγίειαν*), as well as the entire Judeo-Christian corpus addressed in this study. It is, moreover, applicable to other religions and faith traditions.
[5] Italicised by the author.

glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'"— Isaiah 58:6–9[6]

In his 1974 book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, inspired by Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, through which Robert M. Pirsig seeks to explore the *mysteries* of the concept of *quality* and, to some extent, constructs his own ontological scheme, he argues that many people will react with hostility if we question the literal meaning of the words of Jesus or Moses. Pirsig nevertheless maintains, *de facto*, that "the mental health of Jesus or Moses, were they to appear today, unknown, with the same messages as many centuries ago, would be called into question" (Pirsig, 2006: 164). However, such a view should neither *demonise* nor mislead the reader in attempting to engage more seriously with the concept of Health, which emerges from this discourse that is so significant for European and indeed world cultural heritage, and that is (for many) sacred.

When the word "healthy" is entered into the search of (one domestic edition[7] of) the Bible, it appears 156 times, (including numerous *greetings*). This is neither a great number nor a negligible one. Health in the *Bible* is often discussed in connection with miracles[8], which are only partially comparable to those occurring in the mystical rites of the Egyptians or certain pre-Socratic thinkers. In these, *purification from illness*, whether of spirit, soul, or body, remains central. Yet such purification now acquires a different meaning: it serves as a trial, a temptation, or a means of repentance (*metanoia* or transformation of mind) since illness originates in the *ancestral sin*, and humanity will finally be freed from it (only) at the Resurrection (Kolundžić, 2019: 11). Only then may the regime of Health be established. It should therefore not be surprising that in *the divine One* of Dionysius the Areopagite, as the ultimate goal and as the path leading toward *mystical henosis*, the first stage is precisely purification – catharsis (Beierwalters, 2009: 117). According to the Book of Malachi (4:1–2), it is like *the Sun of Righteousness* [*bearing*] *healing in its wings*, promised above all to those who, in reverence, fulfil the Third Commandment of God, carefully uttering His Name (2009: 456). Furthermore, on the basis of the cited passage from Isaiah, one may conclude that *healing* belongs also to those who care for the hungry, the afflicted, and the homeless. Following what

[6] The author's original citations are taken from *Sveto Pismo ili Biblija Starog i Novog zaveta* (Metafizika, Belgrade, 2009). In the present English translation, all biblical quotations are rendered according to the New King James Version (NKJV), precisely from *The Holy Bible*, New King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982.
[7] The term "domestic edition" refers to an edition available in the author's local context, namely: *Sveto Pismo ili Biblija Starog i Novog zaveta*. Belgrade: Metafizika, 2009.
[8] See, for example: Jeremiah 33:6; Ezekiel 30:21; Matthew 8:8; 9:21; 12:13; Mark 3:5; 5:28–29; 6:56; 8:25; 16:18; Luke 6:10; 7:7–10; 8:35–47; John 5:4–14; Acts 3:16; 4:10…

was likely his favourite Old Testament book, this was likewise one of the important demands of philosophy for the contemporary thinker Emmanuel Levinas[9], who maintained that the *Resurrection*, *together with death, constitutes time* (Levinas, 2006: 256).

Turning to the New Testament, one frequently encounters the notion of *sound doctrine*[10] or of *the Word understood as true health*, which is none other than the *Logos* who, according to the words of the Gospel of John (1:14), became the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, and which, as His (sound) word — διάλογος (dia-logos) — is to be followed. Even then, however, it was assumed that a time would come when people would no longer endure sound teaching, "but, according to their own desires, they will heap up for themselves teachers who say what their itching ears wish to hear."[11] Although one may discern in these words a clear critique of *Hellenic philosophy* and of other philosophical traditions that conceive of philosophy in therapeutic terms, it cannot go unnoticed that Health, both in the *Bible*[12] and in thinkers such as Plato and Seneca, is frequently associated with the body. This should not be surprising, since just as the Judeo-Christian tradition transformed ancient vices into mortal sins, so too, in matters of diet, it replaced the principle of *dietetics* with fasting, thereby extending it to the psychic and spiritual dimensions. Thus, already in the Book of Genesis (1:29), God instructs that human beings were created to be herbivores and to nourish themselves solely on such food, while only after the Flood were they permitted to consume meat due to the scarcity of vegetation (Genesis 9:3)[13]. After the fast, Christians accordingly commend Christ's New Testament teaching concerning *Christ as the Bread of Heaven*, from whom, as stated in the *Gospel of John* (6:68, NKJV), a person, by eating His Body (as wine) and drinking His Blood (as bread), lives

[9] See: Vuk Trnavac, "Bližnji kao drugi je brat: Levinasova 'emocionalna fenomenologija bliskosti' izražena horizontom lica drugog" ["The Neighbour as the Other Is a Brother: Levinas's 'Emotional Phenomenology of Proximity' Expressed through the Horizon of the Face of the Other"], in: Treća studentska filozofska konferencija Summa Studiorum Philosophiae – Filozofija i emocije [The Third Philosophy Conference for Students Summa Studiorum Philosophiae – Philosophy and Emotions], Proceedings, Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad, 2021, pp. 145–159.

[10] 1 Timothy 1:10; Titus 1:9 (NKJV). Translator's note: In biblical quotations from the NKJV, the word "sound" (as in e.g., "sound doctrine") reflects the wording of that translation. In the original Serbian text, the author consistently uses the word zdrav ("healthy"), which carries the broader conceptual connection to Health developed throughout this article.

[11] 2 Timothy 4:3 (NKJV)

[12] See 1 Kings 13:6; 2 Kings 2:21; 2 Kings 20:7; 2 Kings 5:10; Isaiah 1:6; Psalm 38:7; Proverbs 3:8; 4:22 (NKJV).

[13] The controversial Miroljub Petrović, in addition to the above, also states: "pa Medical research confirms that plant-based food is best for humans, and that foods of animal origin may be consumed in moderate quantities. The second and third leading causes of death in the contemporary world are tobacco and alcohol consumption. Holy Scripture sets forth a prohibition against the production of foods that have a poisonous effect (see Deuteronomy 29:18, NKJV). For further information, see: (a) Neil Nedley, Zakoni zdravlja i izlečenja [Proof Positive] (Belgrade: Metafizika, 2010); (b) Miroljub Petrović, Osnovi teokratije [Foundations of Theocracy] (Belgrade: Metafizika, 2009). In: *Holy Scripture or the Bible of the Old and New Testaments* (Belgrade: Metafizika, 2009), p. 859. Healthy food is also mentioned in Habakkuk 1:16 (NKJV).

eternally (Bulović, 2020: 33)[14]. This forms the basis of the sacrament of the *Eucharist*, or *Holy Communion*, which is for believers the Medicine of Immortality! Another sacrament that brings incorruptible Health is the Anointing of the Sick, the most widespread means of healing employed by the Church in continuation of Christ's work. The priest anoints the sick person with consecrated oil in the form of a cross, most often on the forehead, though also on other parts of the face and body, while praying for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration and renewal of both soul and body (Kolundžić, 2019: 32). For as Jesus Himself says:

> "*Those who are well have no need of a physician*, but those who are sick. "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17, NKJV); and "*And the prayer of faith will save the sick*, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." (James 5:15, NKJV)[15]

Hence Berdyaev's words that "In rationalistic logic there exists an unhealthy limitation, the consequence of sin; in the *Logos there is the boundlessness of health*" (Berdyaev, 2006: 29)[16] indicate that in the Lord Jesus Christ are contained all the othernesses of Health, which belong to the One God, who is the only One and, according to *the Psalms of David* (102:28), *always* the same (1989: 398). Thus He (She, It) is the One who is always the Same. (Trnavac, 2021b: 71–74).[17]

Health in Eastern Patristic Theology

> *"Teach and exhort these things. 3* ***If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, 4 he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words****, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, 5 useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself. 6 Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7* ***For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry***

[14] On p. 84, a study from 1988 is cited which shows that even the then-problematic HIV infection was not transmitted through Holy Communion.
[15] Italicised by the author.
[16] Italicised by the author.
[17] Translator's note: The original Serbian formulation intentionally plays with masculine, feminine, and neuter grammatical forms (Jedini/Jedina/Jedino; Isti/Ista/Isto), a distinction that cannot be fully reproduced in English, in order to underscore the metaphysical identity of the divine beyond gender categories.

nothing out. *8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content."* (1 Timothy 6:2–8)[18]

It would indeed be difficult not to agree with Jean-Claude Larchet, one of the greatest (living) authorities on this subject, that according to the Holy Fathers the essence of human Health "consists in this: that, generally speaking, a person in all things be in that state which corresponds to the maturity of his entire being; in other words, that he be in harmony with his true nature. And his true nature and his true life, as we have said, lie in the realisation of that perfection of his being which God has willed, by conforming himself to Christ in the Spirit" (Larchet, 2022:31). In order for a person to attain this perfection of his being in Christ and fully realise his nature — whose rule, principle, and goal is Christ — and thus arrive at his salvation, which according to Larchet is also "complete health, man must live according to the Spirit and live out a certain mode of spiritual existence" (Larchet 2022, 29-30).

This is indeed confirmed by the words of the Holy Fathers. Thus, according to Gregory of Nyssa (335–394), "medicine and theology are two sisters," and as such it is clear that both have Health as their proper object. Concerning the harmony between Health and virtue as the natural health of the soul, not only Maximus the Confessor — who writes, "What health is to the living body, that virtue is to the soul" — but also Saint Dorotheus of Gaza, Saint Basil the Great, and Evagrius speak in similar terms (Larchet 2022: 33).

By distinguishing within the structure of the human person three levels of its constitution — the spiritual, the psychic (or mental), and the bodily — the Holy Fathers likewise distinguish three modes by which illnesses arise. The first are those "according to nature"; the second are those caused by demonic influence; and the third category of illness is reserved for "those that have appeared as a consequence of man's enslavement to the passions" (Srbulj [ed.], 2022: 7).

However, the key novelty introduced by their thought — and thus by the entire (Judeo-)Christian paradigm — lies in the fact that it is the first in which Health and Transcendence are fully identified with one another. In the words of Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), they share a common name: "When God comes, since He drives away every illness and every spiritual weakness, He is called Health, because He grants us spiritual health." Likewise, as Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) states, "The health and perfection of the soul consist in conformity to Christ" (Larchet, 2022: 31). In a word, God is Health, and thus the one and only true source of every Health!

[18] Bold – author's emphasis.

> I would also point out that the watchword "a healthy mind in a healthy body," once popular in Soviet medicine, is, from a moral standpoint, entirely untrue. A strong body (like higher education) is by no means a guarantee of spiritual maturity. Can an academic who has never in his life opened the Holy Gospel — though he has examined hundreds of books for professional reasons — truly be called spiritually healthy? We think not… Just as mental illness may prove salvific for an Orthodox Christian, so spiritual emptiness and moral corruption are destructive for the rational (or "sound-minded") person. God's judgments are revealed in eternity. There, Judgment and recompense for our deeds await us — Avdejev (Srbulj [ed.], 2022: 38–39).

In response to the question, "Is there a clear Orthodox standpoint on contemporary problems of bioethics, or only opinions expressed by the Local Churches?", Jean-Claude Larchet replies: "The Orthodox Church has a very interesting view of bioethics, grounded in the meaning of the beginning of life and its end." In his view, questions concerning the beginning of life are of great importance for contemporary people, and the Church bears considerable responsibility in this regard, especially in light of the large number of abortions taking place in the world — against which, in his judgment, Christians should take a firm stand. In addition to these issues, Larchet also addresses the need to reflect upon various methods of so called "test-tube" fertilisation, as well as the problems of euthanasia and suicide. At the conclusion of his response, he states:

"Many people perceive the body as human property. Clearly, if we begin our discussion from fundamental Christian values, we may discover very interesting and important insights for contemporary people, and show that not only human but also divine realities are grounded in what Christ has revealed about the human" (Srbulj, J., Knjigoljubac [eds.], 2023: 8–9).[19]

Concerning the contemporary status of science, Larchet states:

> "The problem is that science today expresses almost totalitarian pretensions, attempting to impose its rationalistic point of view upon everyone. It considers the reality that can be rationally conceptualised to be the only reality. This is the only domain of the phenomenal world with which it concerns itself" (Ibid., 9–10).

[19] Jean-Claude Larchet, "The Gift of Suffering, the Gift of Medicine, the Gift of Meaning" (interview)

By this he means that science should indeed be acknowledged as legitimate in studying such phenomena, but that it ought to limit itself to that sphere and refrain from making claims regarding the existence of another domain. He concludes:

> "The Church, founded upon the Christian faith, must show that beyond the phenomenal world and nature there exists another world — not separate from the natural world, but one that gives it deeper meaning. Let us remind science that its knowledge is entirely legitimate, yet separated from the spiritual knowledge of the world; and that theories grounded solely in the phenomenal realm remain superficial" (Ibid., 9–10).

On the other hand, Lorgus and Orlova would say: "Church and medicine, medicine and Church — this is a harmonious relationship, though only recently so." The root of the word medicine — the Indo-European *med* — denotes measure and middle (Dimitrijević, V., Srbulj, J. [eds.], 2010: 296)[20]. It is up to us how we understand and apply it, and here one of the *religious-transcendental perspectives* has been offered!

Conclusion

> "13 *Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus*. 14 That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us." (2 Timothy 1:13-14 (NKJV))[21]

This paper could hardly be concluded more fittingly than with the words of "Grandfather" Ivan Ilyin. In one of his letters, he spoke with particular wisdom about Health in an *Orthodox key*:

...And precisely there, in that depth of 'instinctive spirituality,' lives the creative seed of health — that wondrous 'gift of organic self-healing' with which we must establish contact…

> **"Health is something more than people ordinarily suppose... Health is a harmony, foreordained by God and pleasing to Him, between personal nature and personal spirit.** Every human being is created for health and called to be healthy. When we are ill, we fail to correspond to our destiny and to God's design for us. What joy could our mutilation or our suffering bring to Him? He sends illness so that we may be healed; He sends it as a path toward Health. Illness is therefore like a mysterious inscription that must

[20] Mitropolit Agatangel, „O delatnosti lekara u našem vremenu" ["On the Work of Physicians in Our Time"].
[21] Italicised by the author.

be deciphered; within it is written everything about our former, misguided life, and also about the new, wise, and healthy life that lies before us. It is a "cipher" that we must interpret, understand, and realise. In this lies the "meaning of illness"" (Dimitrijević, V., Srbulj, J. [eds.], 2010: 361–362).[22]

And thus, through neshamah (נשמה) (in the 'nose', and in Serbian through 'no-zdr(a)-va[23]), through SPIRIT, SOUL, AND BODY brought to life — we arrive not only at HEALTH, but also at FREEDO(M)LOVE!

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[22] Ivan Iljin, „Zdravlje je u Hristu. Zdravlje". ["Health Is in Christ. Health"]
[23] Translators note: The Serbian word *zdrav* means "healthy"; the graphic fragmentation "no-zdr(a)-va" highlights this root within the word for "nostril" (nozdrva).

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RELIGIJSKO-TRANSCENDENTALNE IMPLIKACIJE ZDRAVLJA: METODO-ONTOLOŠKA PERSPEKTIVA (JUDEO-)KRŠĆANSTVO

SAŽETAK

Slažući se s pogledom Vladete Jerotića da je sfera religioznosti, što se tiče ljudskog života, najprofinjenija, najdublja i najosjetljivija od svih sfera, autor nastoji, primjerom Zdravlja, pokazati da je stalna prisutnost Božjeg Duha u čovjeku — *nešama* (נשמה) u judaizmu, u "nosu" (i u srpskom *no-zdr(a)-va*), kada je čovjek postao čovjek po Božjoj zapovijedi — prema judeo-kršćanskom vjerovanju, čini i ljudsku slobodu i ljubav, odnosno *slobodnu ljubav*.

Istraživanje stoga ima za cilj ponuditi svojevrsni uvod u judeo-kršćansku eshatologiju zdravlja, čiji *je linearni krug* započinjao u Rajskom vrtu prije prapovijesnog grijeha, nakon čega je *došlo do pada u bolest*; i tek s pojavom Krista ponovno je počelo *uzdizati* se prema idealu prvobitnog zdravlja.

Na taj će način Waldenfelsova (donekle ironicna) teza da poglavar Crkve, odnosno sama Crkva, "brine o općem mentalnom zdravlju" *svih ostalih,* biti razmatrana unutar metodono-ontološkog okvira.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Zdravlje, Transcendencija, religija, judeo-kršćanstvo, *metodo-ontologija*.