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Gamaleia's spiritual letters

Siemion Ivanovich Gamaleia was born in 1743 in Kitaigorod near Poltava into a family of a priest. In 1755-1763, he attended a theological academy in Kiev and then the university of St. Petersburg. In 1769, he was a professor of Latin in the corps of cadets. Since 1770, he served in the Senate. In 1774, he became a director of the chancellery to the governor of Mogilev and Polotsk, the territory acquired after the first partition of Poland in 1772. In 1782, he moved to Moscow for a similar post and retired from his duties in 1784 to devote himself to teaching and to translation work. He spent the next 30 years in Novikov's estate in the village of Avdot'ino near Moscow. He died in 1822.

Gamaleia was a mason, a member of the Harmony lodge in Moscow (founded in 1780), a member of the Order of the Golden-Rose Cross in Russia. He participated in managing the Moscow masonry. In 1782, the Deucalion lodge was opened in Moscow under his leadership. He also established a masonic lodge in Tula of which he was a grand master.

He knew several languages and made numerous translations of spiritual literature that included voluminous translation of Jakob Boehme's works (they were never published). Gamaleia's friends published posthumously three volumes of Gamaleia's letters to various people. However, it is not indicated when and to whom these letters had been written. Occasionally, using very little personal information included in these letters, guesses can be ventured concerning the identities of the recipients. The letters are very important as a testimony of the spirit of the Russian Rosicrucians that contributed enormously to the shaping of the spirituality of eighteenth century Russia through the extensive publication efforts of Novikov and the circle of his masonic associates.

Self-knowledge

Gamaleia had no doubt about the existence of God and only occasionally mentioned barely discernible physico-theological proof of His existence, e.g., when he

said that we can know God from the makeup of nature (2.168).¹ Generally, theology was not his concern. He was primarily interested in the individual human being and being on the right side of the relation between God and this human being.

Semen Gamaleia



Źródło: <http://nervana.net.ru/teachers/gamaleas.htm>

¹ References are made to Gamaleia's letters, *Письма С. И. Г.*, Москва: В Университетской типографии, vols. 1-2, 1832, vol. 3, 1839.

There are two avenues opened after death: to be with God or in separation from God, i.e., to be in heaven or in hell, "eternal hellish suffering" (1.62). Since the soul is immortal it is critical to gear the earthly life to assure the eternal dwelling in heaven. How does one accomplish it? By searching oneself.

Gamaleia accepted the old Delphic maxim of knowing oneself as the way of acquiring wisdom. True knowledge of oneself should lead to the recognition of one's own nothingness in comparison with the grandeur of the whole of creation and with the majesty of the Creator. As Gamaleia stated, man has to know himself since without this knowledge, he cannot know nature nor the nature of the Creator (1.122). Remarkably, it would appear that the recognition of one's own smallness automatically would bring the recognition of the absolute attributes of God, apparently because goodness, mercy, etc. must reside somewhere if the mind has an idea about these attributes, so they must be placed in God, an absolute being, whereby, implicitly and rather flippantly, Gamaleia would have used the ontological argument for the existence of God.

Self-knowledge, if genuine, leads to humility, not to self-elevation, since whoever knows oneself sees oneself as unworthy and exclaims this in one's heart: I am unworthy! (3.147). Unworthy of what? Of being accepted to the eternal presence of God. What should one do, then? One has to work on oneself through self-renunciation, recognition of one's smallness, and, in particular, through suppression of pride – pride in one's own value and one's own accomplishments. This is because there is nothing worthy that originated in oneself, "since we cannot even think by ourselves about anything good because all goodness in our thoughts, in words, and deeds are not ours but the Lord's" (1.32). Self-knowledge is the way to, as it were, closing one's own ego and opening to the voice of God who speaks in every human being and whose voice can be recognized by anyone who is ready to listen to it: the voice of the Spirit of Christ teaches about the truth, repentance, and preparation for eternity (35), which man can find in himself. Man should renounce himself and his pride (36) by giving himself up to the will of God (37).

Everyday life should be the life of renunciation and readiness to accept the will of God in everything. We live in God; thus, everything happens according to His will, whether we understand it or not; thus, we should submit our reason to faith (1.83), whereas feelings and passions should be under the control of reason (148). "We should accept spiritual and bodily illnesses with gratitude and drive away dark thoughts by prayer and by reading of the Scriptures and other books" (1.93, 2.1).² And thus, Gamaleia said that he was sick since he did not make an effort to suppress his thoughts (2.237), presumably, the thoughts contrary to the Christian spirit. If everything happens by God's will, "so this Hand through my enemy makes me, who is not innocent, humble and helps me to be transformed from the child of wreath to [the child of] love for all"; suffering is for one's own good (163). Everything that happens should be endured with patience since "in patience or restraint there is eternal life – eternal peace" (1.175) and thus patience is good in everything (57). However, like every good thing, patience is the great gift of God for which everyone should ask who wants to work on his salvation (195).

² In this, Gamaleia accepted Thomas à Kempis' sentiment that the believer should take gladly any trouble or heaviness (*The imitation of Christ* 3.30).

There are some guidelines that Gamaleia provided for conducting one's life: a person should 1. talk only a little; 2. obey the law of God and of the land; 3. be of good morals; 4. love everyone; 5. not be shy, but courageous in virtue (1.202); 6. be disinterested in virtue; 7. embrace the death of one's own selfishness and of the carnal man. The more a person succeeds in meeting these guidelines, the better he sees his own imperfections and the need for more work on himself (203). Self-knowledge is thus not a passive self-observance of one's own thoughts and feelings, but a fairly exacting work of bringing to the fore what may be concealed in the hidden recesses of one's own self.

How far the life of self-renunciation should go has no unique answer. However, it appears that Gamaleia sometimes went too far in his advances and would not have been very easy to live up to his standards. He stated that according to the Gospel, who wants to be a Christian should leave his wife and children (2.4) and reject himself, but Gamaleia was displeased by the decision of someone who wanted to get married at an old age since "the devil makes him a joke diverting him from clear thinking and wanting to ensnare him eternally in his net" (5). Gamaleia also castigated his friend: You want to get married. For how long will she be with you? (3.236). It is better to have Christ as a friend than a mortal wife (237; for another discouragement, see 1.154). Any serious attention paid to earthly affairs is a distraction from what counts, namely, the eternal life. Therefore, the *memento mori* principle should be a constant guide: remember death, be ready for it in each minute (1.91); heal the inner man and be ready to die at any time (188). All daily and professional actions should be made with the eye directed to eternity. In particular, Gamaleia, a consummate translator, said that for a good translation, knowledge of the foreign language is needed, knowledge of Russian, and also life should be led according to the content of the book (3.165-166), where it is stated in the context of translating solid spiritual books. Such an advice resembles the process of iconography which requires the iconographer to reach a requisite level of spirituality to do his job properly; talent by itself is insufficient.

Body, soul and spirit

According to Gamaleia, a human being consists of the body, soul, and spirit that are the three worlds that constantly fight with one another for priority (2.81). The idea of the tripartite man was fairly commonly accepted in books valued by Russian masons.³ Although it is contrary to the Orthodox teaching of the two-partite man (the body and the soul/spirit), it appears that Gamaleia embraced both ideas in his view that a person who is not reborn is bipartite because he is 1. carnal, elemental, and astral in this world, and 2. soulish in the fiery world (or in fire of nature, i.e., in sin, 3.173). A reborn person is tripartite, since he also is 3. spiritual in the luminous world (120), i.e., he lives in love or in the light (3.173). Gamaleia also stated that there are three worlds in man. 1. External world wants to have everything in store: food, clothing, and bodily comfort. 2. Fiery world wants others to serve him without serving anyone. 3. When listening to conscience then the luminous world of the Spirit of Christ prompts him to reject what

³ Georg von Welling, *Opus mago-cabbalisticum et theosophicum in which the origin, nature, characteristics and use of salt, sulfur and mercury are described in three parts*, York Beach: Weiser Books 2006 [1719], p. 115, cf. p. 46; John Mason, *Self-knowledge*, London: Printed for James Buckland 1774 [1745], p. 33; [Christian A.H. von Haugwitz], *Hirten-Brief an die wahren, ächten Freymäurer alten Systems*, [Leipzig: Böhme] 1785, p. 75.

is temporary, speaks about humility, suffering, death, and resurrection, and it is up to the will which world is chosen and whether a person becomes like the devil, an animal, or an angel of light (2.66). Because we also read that the carnal or external, mortal man lives by the spirit of this world (3.173, 3.37, 192), then the carnal world seems to be the same as the external world; the fiery world seems to be the inner world which in an unregenerated man is driven by sin. The carnal world of man is open to outside influence; the fiery world is driven by the sin residing in each man. Only the luminous world is free of sin and is imbued with spirituality stemming from God.

The connection between the triad of the body, soul, and spirit, the three aspects or sides (elemental, astral, and spiritual), and the three worlds (external, fiery, and luminous) is not altogether clear. Gamaleia wrote: if I live by the elemental spirit, my desires cannot go beyond elements; if I live by astral reason, then they can only reach the spirit of this world; when being worthy of the Spirit of the Son of God, I enter with Him directly to the throne of the Heavenly Father (2.86). Also, we learn that the astral spirit grows in knowledge here if it does not allow the elemental spirit to rule over itself; it was created only for this world; thus, the immortal soul is in danger without the eternal light and the Spirit of Christ. The rational spirit (which is the same as the astral spirit (138)) is dark fire without eternal light, as seen in scholars and artists who are proud (140). Because these remarks were included in letters to Gamaleia's fellow mason, it may not have been necessary to explain what these spirits were. Apparently, at least the terminology comes from Dutoit who wrote in his *Divine philosophy* about the astral spirit that replaced in the fallen man the pure spirit that had illuminated him before the fall.⁴ The astral spirit is the source of the genius of writers, artists, etc. In Voltaire it was of refined and diabolical kind, affected by the devil. God used the astral spirit in Fénelon (Dutoit, 59 note 2). That is, the astral spirit would be ingenuity that can be used for good or for ill. The astral spirit is a purified and ennobled reason (286), the highest point of reason (73) that can know the mysteries of religion only by analogy and is unable to get to the level of pure Truth (287). It would appear then, that the elemental spirit is limited to sensory cognition that can be easily skewed by passions. Astral spirit would be natural reason that can be influenced by the senses, thereby resulting in errors (cf. 162). There are different levels of perspicacity of the astral reason and the highest level of such spirit can be found in the sages of this world that include Pythagoras, Virgil, and Homer (286). The astral spirit is an earthly and inferior substitute of the pure spirit, the Spirit of God (73), but it is necessary to be able to live the life on earth. For eternity, the pure spirit has to be regained (75), presumably by rebirth.

Johann Schwarz, a professor of the Moscow University and a mason, recognized the existence of three parts of the human being: elemental, astral (mental soul), and mental (conscientious) spirit⁵ and three different modes of cognition: elemental, metaphysical, and theological.⁶ Schwarz thus identified conscience with the mental spirit which appears to be the same as Gamaleia's spiritual side of man. Gamaleia did urge in his letter to do quickly and fervently what conscience says since on this depends one's

⁴ Keleph ben Nathan [Marc Ph. Dutoit de Mambrini], *La philosophie divine, appliquée aux lumieres naturelle, magique, astrale, surnaturelle, céleste et divine*, 1793, vol. 1, p. 36.

⁵ Иван Г. Шварц, *Беседы о возрождении и молитве; Записки; Речи; Материалы для биографии*, Донецк: Вебер 2010, p. 88.

⁶ Иван Г. Шварц, *Лекции*, Донецк: Вебер 2008, pp. 105-106;

happiness on earth and in heaven (1.215). In old times, people learned from the voice of conscience when there were no books (3.106). This would indicate that the highest level of spiritual development is already in each man. Gamaleia seems to have been in agreement with that when he stated that the entire heavenly kingdom is in man, but not in everyone is it open (1.17). The fall of man thus did not eradicate from man the highest level of spiritual development; it concealed it, buried it under the elemental spirit and astral spirit, and overwhelmed it with the weight of senses and passions. Spiritual rebirth would thus be the spiritual unlocking of hidden spiritual treasures. One's own strength is insufficient to accomplish it; this is where the divine help is indispensable: "the Teacher, Christ the Lord opens the human mind and heart" (1.18) – since the mind is in the head and the conscience is in the heart⁷ – in particular, only Christ can open the mind to proper understanding of the Scriptures; however, to that end, "rebirth into a new man is necessary, and the old natural reason is completely unsuitable" (3.145). Gamaleia took it for granted that this fundamental concept of rebirth, of being born again, was understood by those to whom letters were written, but the published form is addressed to everyone, not only to the fellow masons.

In a rather disconnected and almost casual fashion Gamaleia stated that a reborn man belongs to the spiritual world (1.120), that man should be reborn in the Spirit of Christ for his eternal salvation (145) and that according to the Scriptures, paradise and hell are inside man, so external hell is not so dangerous and external paradise is of little benefit without inner rebirth (3.60). Rebirth is obviously an act of God and yet a participation of a person appears to be indispensable, at least in preparing a way. We should strive for being born again, wrote Gamaleia, among others by living moderately (1.68). And yet, in his old age, Gamaleia had a sobering thought that he could not certainly say to which side he belonged, carnal or spiritual (2.172) and that he was still too weak to be ready to be born again because of old habits, desires, thoughts, and presentations (1.233). If Gamaleia with his life of constant self-abasement, a life of an ascetic, was not ready, who was? If a true Christian is someone who is born again, and Gamaleia did not include himself in this category, how many Christians ever existed who met his standards? Gamaleia's heaven would appear to be a fairly sparsely populated place. In imposing very strong requirements on rebirth, Gamaleia joined Lopukhin who delineated more fully his idea of the Christian life in his *Some characteristics of the inner church* (written in 1789), and in *Something for a reflection about prayer and the essence of Christianity* (1814). Gamaleia seems to have corresponded with Lopukhin since in one letter he thanked for explanations concerning the inner church (2.124), the only place in which Gamaleia mentioned the inner church – the phrase introduced by Lopukhin – or, for that matter, any church.

Spiritual life

The fact of not mentioning any church actually sets the tone of all of Gamaleia's letters. Although unilluminating on the conceptual level and marred by confusing terminological explanations, they are profoundly spiritual by focusing on the spiritual life of each person and the relation of the inner man with God, the God who is recognized as the Creator and the Lord of the universe, but is primarily recognized as

⁷ Astral spirit is in the brain, moral feeling (conscience) is in the heart, Шварц, Беседы, p. 103.

the providential God, the God of love, the God who cares for each and every human being. Although humans quite infrequently are disinterested in the divine sphere, God, who wants all humans to live with Him eternally and Himself, prepared the way by self-sacrifice through the person of Christ. The message of salvation and the necessity, all-importance of salvation permeates all Gamaleia's letters. He wrote to his Rosicrucian friends in the way which is hardly different from a letter that a Sunday-school teacher concerned about the spiritual life of his pupil could write to this pupil. Thus, we read that the first duty of a Christian is to love God with all his heart and then to love his neighbor (1.21, 29). Life should be filled with prayer, where prayer is not just saying words, but a proper attitude: humility and love, trying to do only good (41). "All of human salvation lies in prayer ... What is needed most is that nothing happens according to our will (58) and that everywhere the will of God was fulfilled" (59). "It is time to protect our heart and watch that evil does not enter [our] thoughts, desires, words, nor deeds. And all of it depends on the human will" (64-65). Man becomes a temple of God when he drives out all thoughts, desires, and plans that are contrary to the evangelical teaching (3.116). Thus, if the church has to be considered an indispensable element of spiritual life, it is man as a temple, man as a church in whom God dwells directly through the Holy Spirit. This direct contact between humans and God characterizes Gamaleia's writings and his own life. It is quite remarkable that Gamaleia, a son of a priest, would say that if we were taught as children to seek everything in ourselves: God, Christ, the kingdom of heaven, wisdom – there would not happen to us later what did happen. We would have asked God and Christ for everything and never we would have repented like now. But this repentance will begin when we separate ourselves from the body if we don't try to enter the narrow path. If only we had learned in youth that God is love and that we live now to fulfill His commandments, we would be afraid of any sinful thought (44-46). Apparently an element of personal relation with God was lacking in the life of the church of Gamaleia's youth, even in his own house. Apparently the ritual aspects of the Orthodox church overshadowed the spiritual aspects of his personal life. And it appears that Rosicrucian masonry was a way of reviving the true Christian spirit for many people hungry for spiritual life and who were unable to find it in the aridity of the official church of their times. Gamaleia found such seekers of living Christianity in Novikov, Lopukhin, Schwarz and others, and masonry was for him, as it was for them, a way of Christian revival. Specifically masonic teachings were secondary and occupy very little space in Gamaleia's letters. It is quite remarkable that although Gamaleia translated the entire corpus of Boehme's works,⁸ there is hardly any trace of influence of Boehme's teachings in Gamaleia's letters.⁹ Only twice did he mention his works without mentioning his name (1.58, 2.15). Incidentally, he recommended reading Boehme's *The threefold life of man* stating: "Read the book to the glory of God and for your eternal benefit without telling anyone about this book and showing it to no one" (2.15-16). As to the secrecy, it may very well be that Gamaleia did not want the reader to be ridiculed

⁸ Георгий В. Вернадский, Русское масонство в царствование Екатерины II, Санкт-Петербург: Издательство имени Новикова 1999 [1917], p. 447.

⁹ Incidentally, Rozanov suggested that Gamaleia's "entire position is in accordance to ideology of Saint-Martin," М.В. Довнар-Запольский, Семен Иванович Гамалея, in: С.П. Мельгунов, Н.П. Сидоров (eds.), Масонство в его прошлом и настоящем, [Москва]: Задруга [1914-1915], p. 35. There is no detectable influence of Saint-Martin in Gamaleia's letters (such an influence can be found in Elagin).

because of reading a mystical book, as it frequently happened at that time. Consider Elagin's statement made in 1786 that new philosophers or the allegedly wise find ridiculous and stupid those who even mention Saint-Martin's *Erreurs et vérité, Tableau naturel*, and similar works.¹⁰ Importantly, Gamaleia referred to Thomas à Kempis much more often than to Boehme (1. 67, 75, 99, 2.148, 194, 225, 3.62, 66, 163) and hardly referred to any masonic or hermetic books; however, he did refer to other Christian authors: Augustine (3.200), Arndt (1.58, 76, 114, 3.62, 158) and relied heavily on John Mason's *Self-knowledge* (1. 35, 62, 234, 3.163, 167), relied on the authority of "old church teachers" (2.219, 3.123), but, primarily, he used very extensively Biblical verses.¹¹ Masonry was not for him a way to get social life, but an avenue to find the living spiritual life of Christianity and God's omnipresence that includes, most importantly, God's presence in each human being.

Appendix

Gamaleia gave several speeches and only four of them have been anonymously published in *The Freemasonic Magazine*.¹² The four published speeches are basically pep talks given to raise the spirit of fellow masons to encourage them to exercise Christian virtues in everything and these speeches add nothing new to what can already be found in Gamaleia's letters. And thus, Gamaleia stated that the Creator endowed people with reason and will (79)¹³ and a mason should get to know himself, nature, and the Creator of all (83).¹⁴ He should seek virtue and get into the habit of a chaste and pure life (84). The mason should be useful for himself and for society. Friendship and love are two pillars of masonry (85). The catechism states what should be the reason to join masons (89): because I was surrounded by darkness and want to see light, and thus, masons are seeking enlightenment (90). Masons should suppress the reign of passions, because of them people walk in darkness; reason should have an upper hand over passions, but reason should be supported by religion (91). A wise man cares about his soul and about life after death, and so should a mason (98). He enjoys the things of this world like others, but moderately (99). He should be satisfied with the station of life determined by eternal Wisdom (100). The overall goal of masons is to become wise. They should consider themselves to be true worshippers of God (102). There are some admonitions somewhat specific to masonry: masons should do what their masters tell them (113) and have unbounded trust in them (114); without this trust, no knowledge can be gained; without fulfilling one's duties, no hieroglyph can be known; these duties are of the kind leading to the change in the heart (116).

¹⁰ Quoted in Вернадский, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

¹¹ The editors of Gamaleia's letters provided an amplified index of all Biblical references along with the text, although Gamaleia frequently gave a verse reference without the text. In any event, the appendix runs for 96 pages.

¹² Вернадский, *op. cit.*, pp. 476-478. Сергей В. Аржанухин, *Философские взгляды русского масонства, по материалам журнала "Магазин свободнокаменщический,"* Екатеринбург: УрГУ 1995, p. 71.

¹³ Page numbers are from *Магазин свободно-каменщический* 1 (1784); only one volume has been published.

¹⁴ Cf. a similar phrase used by Novikov in the preface to the *Moscow Monthly Publication* (1781), Николай И. Новиков, *Избранные сочинения*, Москва: Государственное Издательство Художественной Литературы 1951, p. 408.

The speeches are thus given in an ecumenical Christian spirit, emphasizing the Christian way of life with some benign references to specifically masonic elements. For the most part, if Gamaleia had not addressed his audience as masons and the place as lodge, the speeches could have been given in any Christian group without offending anyone's religious sensitivities.

Streszczenie

Adam Drozdek

Duchowe listy Gamalei

Autor konsekwentnie analizuje dość znaczny korpus duchowych listów Semena Gamalei, jego myśli o Bogu, człowieku, wiedzy tajemnej. Autor rekonstruuje określoną duchową drogę, którą przeszedł Semen Gamaleja w procesie poznania samego siebie, bada i przedstawia czytelnikowi kluczowe rozważania Gamalei o „wewnętrznym człowieku”, skierowane do swoich przyjaciół, najpewniej, członków koła masonskiego.

Резюме

Адам Дроздек

Духовные письма Гамалеи

Автор последовательно анализирует довольно значительный массив духовных писем С.И. Гамалеи, его размышления о Боге, человеке, сокровенном знании. Автор реконструирует определенный духовный путь, который прошел Семен Гамалея в процессе познания себя, изучает и представляет читателю важные размышления Гамалеи о «внутреннем человеке», адресованные своим друзьям, очевидно, представителям масонского кружка. Статья посвящена вопросу, который совершенно не исследован в исторической литературе. До этой статьи не существовало работы, специально посвященной анализу писем Семена Гамалеи и реконструкции его духовного мира, духовных исканий. Таким образом, это исследование вносит важный вклад в изучение культурно-интеллектуальной истории XVIII – начала XIX века.

