

QUESTIONS OF WAR AND PEACE IN THE THEOLOGY OF ARCHIMANDRITE SOPHRONY SAKHAROV (1896-1993)

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The greatest suffering, which I have continuously endured throughout my whole life, has been caused by the bitter and salty waves of hatred between people. There are no prayers that can stop and overcome this poison which fills the air of our planet with the stench of blood and the terror of death. The soul of man is tired of this exceedingly sorrowful sight and desires no longer to continue its days on earth drinking from this ‘cup’.

Archimandrite Sophrony¹

Thus wrote Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov towards the end of his long life,² with more than seven decades spent in full dedication to God: first as a monk in obedience to a saintly elder, then as a hermit and father confessor, later on as an abbot and writer and finally a recluse for nearly twenty years before his death at the age of 97. He was born in 1896 in Moscow and died in 1993 in his monastic home in Essex (England). He lived through the whole of the twentieth century and was a witness to the greatest wars the world had ever seen – a tragic consummation of the history of Adam’s children which he diagnosed with the short phrase, ‘the whole human corpus is sick’.³

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¹ A. Sophrony, *Таинство христианской жизни [The Mystery of Christian Life]* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist / Moscow: Sv. Troitskaja Sergieva Lavra, 2009), ‘Epilogue’, p. 266 [in Russian]. See also *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Patriarchal Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2004), pp. 202-203. In the notes that follow, where the place of publication and the publisher of Fr Sophrony’s works are not included, the reader should assume a reference to the Monastery of St John the Baptist founded by Fr Sophrony in Essex, UK. Sources in Russian or French are given in my translation unless otherwise indicated.

² The best introduction remains Nicholas Sakharov, *I Love, Therefore I Am* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007).

³ A. Sophrony, *His Life is Mine*, tr. by R. Edmonds (London: Mowbrays, 1977), p. 92.

My aim in this paper is to bring into sharper focus the problematic of war and peace in the theology of Fr Sophrony. I shall seek to demonstrate that his works provide a uniquely consistent theological response to what he called the ‘exceedingly sorrowful sight’ of war in the twentieth century. I see my investigation as belonging to the field of contemporary Orthodox theology where the assessment of the significance of war for theological thought is still very much in its infancy. In the context of works like *Communion and Otherness* by Metropolitan John Zizioulas, where Fr Sophrony receives a wholly positive acclaim,⁴ and the growing number of publications on the topic of war and Orthodox theology,⁵ what appears to have remained less developed is an engagement with monastic efforts to respond to the ultimate theological questions on the nature of God and on divine providence in the last century scarred by global military conflicts. It is here that Fr Sophrony’s contribution breaks new ground and as such deserves further attention.

⁴ J. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 76, 83, 303-305.

⁵ The *pro* peace line is most pronounced in H. Bos and J. H. Forest (eds.), *For the Peace from Above: An Orthodox Resource Book on War, Peace and Nationalism* (Bialystok, Poland: Syndesnos, 1999). Alexander Webster has studied the topic in a series of publications: *The Pacifist Option: The Moral Argument Against War in Eastern Orthodox Moral Theology* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998); *The Price of Prophecy: Orthodox Churches on Peace, Freedom, and Security* (Washington, D.C: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993). A special issue of *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 47/1 (2003) was devoted exclusively to a discussion of ‘Just War’ in Orthodoxy. Webster’s response came in the form of a new book co-authored with D. Cole, *The Virtue of War: Reclaiming the Classic Christian Traditions East and West* (Salisbury MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 2004). For a sharp review, see A. Louth for *In Communion* 33 (2004), online at: <http://www.incommunion.org> (accessed 24 November 2014). Webster’s historical argumentation is contextualised by the research of A. Laiou, ‘The Just War of Eastern Christians and the Holy War of the Crusaders’, in R. Sorabji and D. Rodin (eds.), *The Ethics of War: Shared Problems in Different Traditions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 30-43, where she argues that: ‘The Crusaders and the Byzantines had two very different conceptions of Christian warfare’ and that the ‘Byzantines neither developed nor embraced the concept of holy war.... The Byzantine concept was ..., preeminently, that of just war’ (pp. 31-32). On the opposite end to Webster is also John McGuckin in his *The Orthodox Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 402-407, and in his earlier article ‘Non-violence and Peace Traditions in Early and Eastern Christianity’, in K. Kuriakose (ed.), *Religion, Terrorism and Globalization. Nonviolence: A New Agenda* (New York: Nova Science, 2006), pp. 189-202 (p. 198 on war as an ‘unmitigated evil’). For a pastorally sensitive modern treatment of the topic from the perspective of an Orthodox chaplain in the US army, emphasising both the tragic necessity of war and the medicinal quality of repentance, see Ph. LeMasters, ‘Orthodox Perspectives on Peace, War and Violence’, *The Ecumenical Review*, 63/1 (2011), pp. 54-61.

In the absence of sustained scholarly reflection on the topic, my argument will draw on the important but brief treatment in Fr Nicholas Sakharov's monograph *I Love, Therefore I Am*.⁶ Although I shall argue for the need to see war as a key factor, I do not claim that my reading of Fr Sophrony's works offers *the* key to unlocking the deeper secrets of his theology. This clearly lies elsewhere, more within the reach of those who focus on his teaching on pure prayer and the vision of what he called the 'great Light of Christ'.⁷ Here he was an heir to the visionary tradition of Eastern Christianity, and especially of Athonite monasticism. The language he used to express himself, however, shows clearly how rooted he was in the reality of the twentieth century:

I once read a newspaper account of an engineer testing the jet engine of a plane who carelessly stepped into the air stream, which caught and lifted him high off the ground. Seeing what had happened, his assistant quickly switched off the engine. The mechanic fell to the ground, dead. Something similar happens to the man of prayer: after being caught up into another sphere he returns to earth 'dead' (*мертв*) to fleshly interest and worldly gains. He will not seek any career. He will not be too upset if he is rejected, nor will he be elated by praise. He forgets the past, does not cling to the present or worry about his earthly future. A new life full of Light has opened before him and in him. The infantile distractions (*детские развлечения*) that occupy the vast majority of people cease to interest him.⁸

⁶ N. Sakharov, *I Love, Therefore I Am*, pp. 223-234. Explicit references to Fr Sophrony are given in Georgios Mantzarides, *Christian Ethics*, 3rd revised ed. (Thessaloniki: Pour-nara, 1991), vol. 2, chapter on *πόλεμος* [in Greek].

⁷ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, pp. 150-189. For the spiritual exegesis of these themes, see the doctoral work of Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou, *Christ, Our Way and our Life: A Presentation of the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony*, translated from the Greek by Sister Magdalen (South Canaan: St Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2003); and his subsequent books published by the Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, *The Hidden Man of the Heart (1 Peter 3:4): The Cultivation of the Heart in Orthodox Christian Anthropology* (Essex, 2007); *Remember Thy First Love: The Three Stages of the Spiritual Life in the Theology of Elder Sophrony* (Essex, 2010); id., *The Enlargement of the Heart: 'Be ye also enlarged' (2 Corinthians 6:13) in the Theology of Saint Silouan the Athonite and Elder Sophrony of Essex*, second American edition (Essex, 2012). Although my chosen topic is not discussed in these works, my analysis of the general trends of Fr Sophrony's theology remains indebted to them.

⁸ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 68. *Видеть Бога как Он есть* (Essex, 1985), pp. 64-65. Also, *His Life is Mine*, p. 59.

This passage offers us a translation of the experience of ancient visionary saints, such as John of Beverley,⁹ or Symeon the New Theologian,¹⁰ into an idiom designed for a twentieth-century audience. The use of the jet engine illustration is a striking one and gives us a sense of the historical context into which the passage must be placed (the years, that is, of the Cold War when Soviet engineers began developing the MiG planes which are still in military use). Indeed, the image may well be taken as one of those ‘fresh’ rather than ‘dead’ things which – as Fr Andrew Louth put it in a recent paper on ‘Tradition and Innovation in the Theology of Fr Sophrony’¹¹ – characterise the expression of this new type of theology.

In what follows, I shall supplement Louth’s argument with the claim that the understanding of this ‘fresh’ theology needs a systematic investigation of Fr Sophrony’s response to the problem of human suffering and, in particular, war. His engagement with the topic is much more complex than his own reference to ‘infantile distractions’ cited above would seem to allow for. To demonstrate this complexity, I begin, in Part One of the paper, with an analysis of the ways in which Fr Sophrony uses the terms ‘war’ and ‘peace’. Having defined the key terms, I move, in Part Two, to his understanding of the workings of divine providence. Here my analysis will be enriched by a comparison with Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), a personal friend and colleague

⁹ See Folcard, *Life of Saint John, Bishop of York*, Chapter 11, in S. Wilson (ed.), *The Life and After-life of St. John of Beverley. The Evolution of the Cult of an Anglo-Saxon Saint* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006). The punishment of the deacon who had exposed himself unprepared to the light of the saint’s vision is described with a unique pun in the Latin: ‘diaconus velut decoctus’ (‘the deacon or rather the cooked one’), *Ibid.*, p. 155. Note, however, an important difference here. For Fr Sophrony the pain is in the repentance that precedes the vision which in itself presents no physical dangers: ‘предваряется видение Света подвигом покаяния, очищающего нас от страстей; весьма болезнен сей подвиг, но самое созерцание света сладостно для сердца и ума’, *Видеть Бога, ‘О Нетварном Свете II’*, p. 159.

¹⁰ Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Discourses*, 10, in J. Darrouzès (ed. and tr.), *Syméon le nouveau Théologien, Traités théologiques et éthiques*, SC 129 (Paris: Cerf, 1967), p. 324. See discussion in H. Alfeyev, *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), chapter 9.

¹¹ A. Louth, ‘Tradition and Innovation in the theology of Fr Sophrony’ (the topics of war and peace are not discussed). I am grateful to Fr Andrew for sharing his unpublished original with me. A translation in Greek entitled ‘Παράδοση και ανανέωση στη σκέψη του Πατρὸς Σωφρονίου’ was included in the volume *Γέροντας Σωφρόνιος, θεολόγος τοῦ ἀκτίστου φωτός* (Ἅγιον Ὄρος: Ἱερά Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου, 2008), pp. 195-200.

of Fr. Sophrony's in Paris. The paper will work its way through large citations of texts, many of which are offered here for the first time in English translation. The conclusion will situate the findings of the paper within the larger Orthodox tradition. It will also indicate possible avenues for comparisons with similar theological developments in theologians from other confessions, like Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy and Jürgen Moltmann.

PART ONE: ON WAR AND PEACE

This is what I can say about myself. For over half a century now, I have been in continuous and terrible pain as a witness to the nightmare of men – who are all brothers – killing one another. At times, this pain causes me to howl like a wild animal, to yelp like a poor dog whose paws have been crushed by a car. And just like the dog, shaking from pain, to crawl away from the paths of men. But when the pain in the heart reaches the limits of our physical endurance, then the invocation of the Name of Jesus Christ brings PEACE which alone keeps us alive.¹²

This key passage comes from an 'Epilogue' published posthumously in the collection *The Mystery of Christian Life* (2009) from which I have also taken my opening quotation. Apparently, there were no indications in Fr Sophrony's archive as to where this Epilogue was intended for, except for a pencil note which read 'End of book'.¹³ In a sense, inasmuch as they offer a summary of his own spiritual journey, his words here are an epilogue to his own life. One of the key words in the passage is 'pain' and he locates its source in the tragic reality of war. In other passages he speaks of the awareness of his own personal mortality and sinfulness, which cause him even greater pain than war or illness or other disasters: 'I inherited the terrible *fall of Adam*... the fall which I aggravate every day of my life.... And I weep and lament to see myself thus'.¹⁴

¹² A. Sophrony, *Тайнство христианской жизни [The Mystery of Christian Life]*, 'Epilogue', pp. 260-261. See also, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 88; *Видеть Бога*, p. 85.

¹³ A. Sophrony, *Тайнство христианской жизни [The Mystery of Christian Life]*, p. 11.

¹⁴ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 19. For the same point with a reference to Symeon the New Theologian, see his 'Talk to the Community' of 31 August 1992, in *Духовные Беседы*, vol. 1 (Essex, 2003), p. 36. Here and when indicated in other citations, the emphasis is in the original.

The fact that a human being could live with such intense levels of pain and still experience the consolation of divine peace became for Fr Sophrony a window into a greater mystery. This mystery is our unique value as ‘persons’ who become Christ-like by transporting ourselves into universal dimensions ‘whenever we suffer tribulation’.¹⁵ This elevated theological position is of crucial importance and we shall come back to it later when we discuss the prayer of the compassionate heart. For the moment, it is important to emphasise that *war* and *peace* clearly stand out as two important preoccupations in the forefront of Fr Sophrony’s spiritual consciousness. Judging by the frequency, with which they appear, these themes rank below strictly theological issues – such as Triadology, Christology, personhood or his focus on the principles of asceticism and community life. Nevertheless, the recurring references to war and peace create visible tension in his writings. Let us examine them in turn to see how he gives to each a new meaning, and how they contribute to his overall theological vision.

1. a) *On War, or on the ‘Blessed Despair’*

In this opening section, I shall argue that there is a pattern in the way Fr Sophrony frames his theological vision around the problematic of war. This pattern is already visible in his first book *St Silouan the Athonite*, which appeared in 1948 and has now become a classic, translated in more than 25 languages.¹⁶ The references to the tragedy of military conflict in *St Silouan* are veiled but nevertheless obvious:¹⁷ he speaks of the lives of millions taken away with ‘incredible ferocity’. Christ had said that even the hairs on our heads ‘are all numbered’ (Matt. 10:30). But this statement and the affirmations that ‘God is love’ and that brotherly love is to be the governing principle of human life (1 John 4:8, 1:5), were now rendered meaningless by the massacres on the front lines and the mass murders in concentration camps. What is only hinted at in the opening page of *St Silouan* receives a fuller treatment in Fr Sophrony’s main autobiographical work *We Shall See Him as He Is*,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁶ First was the mimeographed edition of 1948, followed by the properly printed edition of 1958 which became the basis for all later reprints and translations. N. Sakharov, *I Love, Therefore I Am*, p. 31.

¹⁷ See the ‘Foreword’ to A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, tr. by R. Edmonds (Essex, 1991), p. vii.

published in 1985 when he was nearly 80 years old. Here the problem is clearly spelled out both in the opening chapter and in the concluding Epilogue. The first chapter contains an extensive reflection on his experience of war. This is set in the context of a discussion on the remembrance of death as the first step on the way to ascetic renunciation and, ultimately, true prayer.¹⁸ This vision is recapitulated in the Epilogue which manages in a single page to convey Fr Sophrony's blunt rejection of what he called 'planetary fratricide' (*планетарное братоубийство*).¹⁹ What we are given is in fact a theological framework supporting the practice of prayer as an antidote to the 'extraordinarily black despair' caused by the tragic reality of war. This emphasis in the Epilogue is mirrored by the references to the First World War and the Russian Revolution given by Fr Sophrony in the opening chapter of the book. Here he reflects on his own destiny and on the very real possibility that he too might have been sent to the front and ordered 'to kill' (*убивать*).²⁰ Later on, he could write with gratitude for this deliverance: he had not shot anyone, he had not even fired at anyone, and was thus free of canonical impediments to be ordained a priest and offer the Eucharist for the whole world.²¹

At the start, however, he focused his life on his own repentance as a monk²² and on what he called the 'appalling extent' of his own blindness.²³ The profound despair at his own 'utter inability' to live a life worthy of

¹⁸ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, pp. 10-18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 236; *Вудеть Бога*, p. 253.

²⁰ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, pp. 10-11 where the key verb is translated as 'slaughtering' [Russian original in *Вудеть Бога*, pp. 8-9]. He was drafted as an officer in the engineering troops but did not go to the front. See the Introduction of M. Egger, 'Archimandrite Sophrony (1896-1993), moine pour le monde', in Archimandrite Sophrony, *La Prière, expérience de l'éternité*, traduit par Archimandrite Syméon (Paris: Cerf, 1998), p. 7.

²¹ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, text only in Russian, *Вудеть Бога*, p. 217. For a review of the canonical tradition referred to by Fr Sophrony, see A. Webster, *The Pacifist Option*, pp. 165-181.

²² It was his habit after work to retire 'quickly' to his cell to 'weep' in repentance for his personal sin. See his 'Talk to the Community' on 17 February 1992, in *Беседы*, vol. 1, pp. 251-252. After his elder's death in 1938, he received permission to continue with this life out of the monastery, as a hermit, where he received the 'spirit of contrition, despair for his own self, and lasting and abundant tears' (at p. 248).

²³ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 165.

God's Kingdom,²⁴ and the deplorable condition of war-wracked humanity shook his heart 'like some volcanic eruption'.²⁵ It was only later that he realised that through this double despair he had been given the gift of constant prayer, and the grace of repentance. In one revealing passage he gave the following explanation of the combined force of these two spiritual elements:

I frequently speak of 'pain' and am often worried that not everyone will rightly understand this ascetic term. The pain I write of is the *leitmotiv* of my life in God. I cannot ignore it... It is the pain of the love of God which detaches the one who is praying from this world to transport him into another. The fiercer the spiritual pain, the more vigorous the attraction to God. The more dynamic our plunge into the depths of the shoreless ocean of suffering, the surer our spirit's ascent into heaven... The soul pulling away from her normal confines and stretching up to the eternal God suffers. Having felt the breath of the Holy Spirit, she sorrows more acutely.²⁶

This passage introduces a distinction, which is crucial for the understanding of the ascetical concept of pain. The suffering of the soul, on which Fr Sophrony comments, is first and foremost an experience of profound personal repentance and deep longing for God. This is the upward ascent, as portrayed in the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai. This movement 'into God', however, is then followed by a descent into human apostasy. For those like the Moses of Gregory of Nyssa, this inspires yet more prayer for the people and more ardent return to God. The pain which comes from the suffering in the world together with the pain of personal repentance can thus become an instrument for salvation. Later on, Fr Sophrony would call this combination of prayerful despair 'blessed'²⁷ precisely because it had helped him identify in his prayer with the suffering in the world, including that caused by war.²⁸ In this way, Fr Sophrony's concern with man's lust for domination and the 'mass murders' of history – whether on German

²⁴ A. Sophrony, *Видеть Бога*, p. 138 : 'я осознал себя до конца неспособным к Царству Святого Бога'.

²⁵ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, tr. by R. Edmonds (Essex, 1996), p. 40.

²⁶ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 88.

²⁷ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 50.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-78.

frontlines or in Soviet concentration camps – remains constant throughout his writings.²⁹ His judgement on military conflict remains the same and he reiterates it in his letters to his sisters in Russia written in the 1960s–80s. Here he is even more graphic in his rejection of what he called a ‘wild beastly life’ (*дикая звериная жизнь*), governed by the ‘law of the jungle’ (*закон джунглей*).³⁰ As he explained in his *On Prayer*, he saw the violence in warfare and persecution as fuelled directly with the destructive energies of the Fall:

One of the first consequences of the primordial Fall was fratricide.... The sin of our forefathers brought about universal dissolution. To this day mankind has not only failed to release itself from the spirit of fratricide but continues to plunge ever deeper into lethal delirium. The experience of centuries has taught man nothing. Victory through violence is always and inevitably short-term in this world. Translated into eternity, it will prove a never-ending disgrace. ‘All ye are brethren,’ said the Teacher–Christ. ‘One is your Father, which is in heaven.’ (Matt 23:8-9)³¹

Connected with this rejection of the value of any victory achieved through violence is a note penned by Fr Sophrony on 15 May 1979 condemning capital punishment. He argued that one should never support it: ‘never, against anyone’.³² He does not wish to address the subject openly as Christian political thinkers like Solov’ev had done,³³ and yet, the implications of

²⁹ ‘Talk to the Community’ on 31 August 1992, in A. Sophrony, *Беседы*, vol. 1, p. 28.

³⁰ A. Sophrony, *Письма в Россию* (Essex, 1997), pp. 173–74 (Letter of 3 March 1969 ‘To Shura’).

³¹ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, pp. 111–112.

³² A. Sophrony, ‘On the Christian Dignity of Man’, in *Рождение в царство непоколебимое [Birth into the Kingdom]* (Essex, 2000), pp. 99–100. Only a decade separates Fr Sophrony from the time when the legislators at the Council of Europe would finally declare, on 3 May 2002, that, ‘The death penalty shall be abolished. No one shall be condemned to such penalty or executed’. *Protocol No. 13 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, concerning the abolition of the death penalty in all circumstances*, Online at: conventions.coe.int and www.legislation.gov.uk (accessed on 5 November 2012).

³³ On 28 March 1881, Solov’ev delivered a public lecture against capital punishment stating that Alexander III should be able – as a Russian Orthodox monarch and a Christian – to grant pardon to the assassins of his father, Alexander II. These bold pronouncements quickly ended Solov’ev’s career at the university. James M. Edie et al (eds.), *Russian*

his statement are very clear. He envisages no limit to the applicability of his pronouncement and makes no distinction between what is usually defined as 'aggressive' or 'defensive' action or between 'ordinary time' and 'time of war'. For him, the teaching of the Gospel defined the killing of a human being by another in all of these cases as 'fratricide', as our 'sin par excellence' and a 'never-ending disgrace'. In the light of these affirmations, we can now see why Fr Sophrony could not accept any justification whatsoever for waging war. Furthermore, he eventually came to see the purpose of his own creative work as a priest in direct contrast to the destruction caused by war.

A uniquely clear articulation of this view is found in a personal letter written to his close friend Fr Boris Stark, who in 1952 had returned to live with his family in Soviet Russia.³⁴ Their correspondence covers a period of five decades. The earliest letters predate Fr Sophrony's arrival in England in 1959. After that we get to see snapshots of the life of an abbot with his growing monastic brotherhood with people from many different nationalities and a daily life of work and prayer in at least three or four languages. We hear of his own routine at the age of 70 with less than four hours of sleep a day, struggling, half deaf, to master English.³⁵ On all these levels, the aim was to transcend one's innate sense of ethnic, cultural and linguistic pride, to overcome one's nationalism and thus become able to gaze at Christ as the Saviour of all people.³⁶ Here again the political line which would differentiate between 'friend' and 'enemy' is abolished. The ultimate goal is set as the common enjoyment of the supreme human 'privilege' of offering the Eucharist for the whole world.³⁷

Philosophy, vol. 3 (New York: Quadrangle, 1965), p. 57. The essence of Fr Sophrony's thought is very similar here but, providentially for him, he expressed them from a different pulpit and in a different century.

³⁴ The collection was published posthumously in, A Sophrony, *Письма к близким людям [Letters to Close Friends]* (Moscow: Otchii Dom, 1997). On the context, see N. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I Am*, p. 30.

³⁵ A. Sophrony, *Письма к близким людям [Letters to Close Friends]*, pp. 84-85.

³⁶ As argued by J.-C. Polet, 'Le dépassement de la nationalité selon le Père Sophrony'. I am grateful to Prof. Polet for sharing his unpublished original with me. A Greek translation is included in *Γέροντας Σωφρόνιος*, pp. 535-545.

³⁷ A. Sophrony, *Письма к близким людям [Letters to Close Friends]*, pp. 100-101. *Buisson Ardent*, 10 (2004), p. 25: 'Le but de notre venue au monastère est de créer un autel pour le service liturgique'.

It is evident that Fr Sophrony's articulation of this high liturgical aim was framed by his concern with the destruction caused by war and the violent separations along national, cultural or linguistic lines. The Easter letter to Fr Boris of 1966 offers the clearest proof for this affirmation. This brief text celebrates the end of several years of hard manual work on the part of the brethren to restore an old twelfth-century church acquired for the needs of their community. The letter contains an unusually frank passage on the experience Fr Sophrony had of hearing confessions during the Second World War. Despite its length, the passage deserves to be quoted in full:³⁸

The church has now become, in the opinion of everyone, very beautiful. For Easter night, we were no less than 200 people. This is an unexpectedly large number by the standards of our small village in an almost deserted part of the country (90 km away from London and far removed from all the main roads). In the final days, the battle for the restoration of the church was as heavy as we could possibly endure. We would get up at 5am for our Lenten services, and would finish the day at midnight, and sometimes even later. We had to do an awful lot in such a short time for the church to be ready for Easter. But now it is all finished.... I invite you to share our joy on this occasion. Yes, indeed, for us this is a true event. It is not without surprise that we all observe how quickly humanity moves away from the Church, from Christ. For me the explanation for this phenomenon lies in the fact that already for half a century (since 1914) the whole Earth breaths the air of never-ending fratricide, and no one offers repentance for this sin. It is only natural that in this state people do not dare to look up at the great Light of Christ. To believe in the good news of Christ that all of us human beings are children of the Beginning-less Creator of the world, to believe in our own eternity through the resurrection from the dead, to believe that a human being is the image of the Living God – this has now become beyond people's strength, and the result is the exponential growth of universal apostasy.

When I was in Greece during the war, I would ask those who came to me to hear their confessions: 'You have forgotten to tell me about one great sin of yours...' 'What sin?' 'Well, that you are a murderer...' 'No, I am not a murderer and so I cannot speak to you about this sin.' 'Yes, but tell me, in the war when you heard that in such and such an operation the so-called enemy suffered great losses, did you not rejoice?' 'Of course I did. They started the war and it is all their fault, so it is good when they get beaten up.' 'Well, my dear, whichever

³⁸ A. Sophrony, *Письма к близким людям* [*Letters to Close Friends*], pp. 86-90.

way you choose to look at this from a normal human point of view, for the Gospel this is complicity, a moral one, in killing, and this is why it is necessary to offer repentance for this sin as well' ('...в плане Евангелия это является соучастием, моральным, в убийстве, и потому нужно и в этом грехе каяться').³⁹

People do not understand this correctly. I do not see how they do. This is why there is nothing else left for them but to abandon their life according to the Gospel, to move away from Christ, to forget their true spiritual origins and to become like animals condemned to dying. And so, to build a church for Christ in such times is a task which is not at all easy.

Pray for me, that the Lord may strengthen the work of our feeble hands...

We must begin our reflection on this crucial passage with a reminder that Fr Sophrony's exhortations here are those of a father confessor. His advice was given in private and concerned the need for repentance for particular individuals. Moreover, this call to repentance represents Fr Sophrony's own spiritual struggle with the joy he himself had experienced when he had learned, first in prayer and then on the news, of the decisive victory of the Red Army at Kursk in August 1943.⁴⁰ Despite these personal limitations, Fr Sophrony's verdict on war places him well beyond the confines of the monastic confessional. His argument is for the recognition of the suffering – physical *and* spiritual – of all sides in every conflict. He is concerned with human fratricide as a global phenomenon which is not restricted to any particular century or location.⁴¹ The unique report in the letter to Fr Boris offers us a glimpse of how Fr Sophrony's desire to accomplish his liturgical vision of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 89. There is no distinction in the original between 'murder' and 'killing'. The second term echoes the traditional rendering of the sixth commandment and expresses better the inclusive sense of Fr Sophrony's Russian (убийство). For his explicit preoccupation with the Exodus command, see *Видеть Бога*, p. 66.

⁴⁰ See his letter 'To Maria' from 23 April 1975, in A. Sophrony, *Письма в Россию [Letters to Russia]*, pp. 140-141. His concern here must have been very personal because his own brother Nikolai served in the Red Army. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴¹ The vitality of the issue is demonstrated by the recent criticisms of the failure on the part of Holocaust scholars, for example, to address genocides of other nations, as argued by S. Wiesenthal: 'For many, many years it has been my opinion that in a humane, in a political and in an educational sense we Jews failed to stress the point that we were persecuted and suffered in concentration camps together with people from 18 other nations during the Nazi regime', quoted in S. Totten, S. L. Jacobs (eds.), *Pioneers of Genocide Studies* (New Jersey: Transaction, 2002), p. 469.

the Eucharist as a prayer for the whole world is directly related to the physical and metaphysical anguish caused by war. Indeed, even the language he uses to describe the work of restoration in the days leading up to Easter bears a military colouring: ‘the battle for the restoration of the church was as heavy as we could possibly endure’.⁴² Here, he is not just speaking about financial or other practical difficulties, though these are clearly implied as well. The struggle is for the ultimate survival of the faith. This, of course, involves no armed action. The agenda is to oppose war’s deadening effects on the common spirit of humanity with spiritual and liturgical means. It is in this context that we understand the meaning behind his words that ‘to build a church for Christ in such times is a task which is not at all easy’. These views expressed in a private letter of 1966 are repeated in the Epilogue to *We Shall See Him as He Is* published two decades later:

Christ’s prescript – ‘and despair not’ through St. Silouan is directed to our times which are noted for the extraordinarily black despair that envelops the whole universe. People of our day, often against their will, become moral participants in endless local and even planetary fratricide. As such – that is, as impenitent moral accomplices – they naturally lose the grace of the Holy Spirit and are no longer able to believe in their immortality through resurrection. Nor do they even seek to. In this self-condemnation to evanescence lies the spiritual essence of *despair*.⁴³

This passage’s central importance lies in the clear link it establishes between war and the universal nature of despair. According to Fr Sophrony, the main issue was the loss of the grace of the Spirit. He believed this was caused by humanity’s unrepentance for the sin of complicity in fratricide. The example with the confessions during the Second World War is not cited here but the underlying principle remains the same both in the private letter and in his printed works. His preoccupation is solely with what we may call a ‘prayer-full response’ to the sinful reality of war. What he proposes is to be distinguished from appeals for political action where the principle of the

⁴² The military terminology is striking: ‘Сражение за восстановление храма было в последние дни до предала наших сил напряженным’, in *Письма к близким людям* [*Letters to Close Friends*], p. 89.

⁴³ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 236 (modified). See also his *On Prayer*, p. 127.

supreme dignity of human life may still apply but is not fully exploited. Indeed, Fr Sophrony does not envisage having to persuade an unwilling audience to accept his views. This principle applies to the entire corpus of his writings, including his personal letters and the final *Talks* which were also addressed to a limited monastic audience. He formulated it as early as 1948 when he wrote on the opening pages of *St Silouan*, 'By its content the present book is destined for *a very narrow circle of people*, whose interest is concentrated on Christian asceticism'.⁴⁴ It is therefore in the context of this self-imposed limitation that we should read those of his opinions on the topic of war which he was prepared to express in print, in Russian and in a number of authorised translations of his works. As we have seen, he had chosen to emphasise the problematic on the final page of his autobiography, with references to the 'extraordinary black despair' and 'endless fratricide', just as he had lamented the lives of millions taken away with 'incredible ferocity' on the opening page of his first book *St Silouan*. Is this framing to be considered accidental? To say this for our author, in my view, would be to go against his self-confessed 'obsession' with the suffering of the world during the Second World War.⁴⁵ We shall have another opportunity to say more about the possible cost of this preoccupation to his own personal life in the conclusion. For the moment our focus is on his vision. Having established war as the heavy frame supporting his theology as it were from below, we now turn to discussing its inner and lighter content – peace.

1. b) *On Peace, or on the 'Compassionate Heart'*

In this section I shall argue that Fr Sophrony approaches peace exclusively as a spiritual reality. Peace for him is never the cessation of military conflict. What is unique about his way of recalling and using history is the fact that, for all the wars he discusses, he never mentions any of the peace treaties. He only mentions the *reality* of war as such, or refers to the *beginning* of military hostility: 'the war started in August', he would say when talking about his experience during the German occupation of the Holy Mountain.⁴⁶ There is here then a clear difference in the way he handles the common terms of

⁴⁴ A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, p. 4 (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁵ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ 'Talk to the Community' on 17 February 1992, in A. Sophrony, *Бесе́ды*, vol. 1, p. 253.

‘war’ and ‘peace’. His preoccupation with the eternal destiny of humanity does not allow him to accept the limited temporal meaning of the two terms. War exists in this world, and this world alone. Its destructive effect, however, could reach eternity when, by precluding repentance, it succeeds in depriving us of the grace of the Spirit. Peace, on the other hand, is not of this world; it is Christ himself. When he comes, he inspires his chosen servants with compassionate prayers for the world which are how he himself wishes to relate to his creatures. When speaking of the compassionate prayer in the heart in one of his last *Talks to the Community*,⁴⁷ Fr Sophrony refers to a well-known passage from St Isaac the Syrian on the compassionate heart.

It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person’s eyes overflow with tears owing to the vehemence of the compassion which grips his heart: as a result of his deep mercy his heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury or the slightest suffering of anything in creation.

This is why he constantly offer up prayers full of tears, even for the irrational animals and for the enemies of the truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy.

He even prays for the reptiles as a result of the great compassion which is poured out beyond measure – after the likeness of God – in his heart.⁴⁸

In making a reference to St Isaac, Fr Sophrony positions himself in continuity with the great spiritual masters of the Christian East. He sees in St Silouan his own God-given link with the golden chain of their sanctity. The centrality of compassion for the world is the hallmark of this tradition. There are numerous references in his book on *St Silouan* where we hear of the great elder’s compassionate heart: of his long prayers in the night for the poor workers who had left their homes and families to earn a living on Athos and

⁴⁷ 8 February 1993, *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁴⁸ Sebastian Brock’s translation in, *The Heart of Compassion: Daily Readings with St Isaac the Syrian*, ed. by A.M. Allchin (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), p. 9. The central importance of this passage for the patristic and the modern Orthodox tradition is discussed in M. Kallistos Ware, ‘Dare We Hope For the Salvation of All: Origen, St Gregory of Nyssa and St Isaac the Syrian’, in Id., *The Collected Works, Vol. I, The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), pp. 193-215.

yet could not afford an egg to celebrate Easter, or of the tears he shed after deliberately killing with boiling water the bats on his balcony, or of how 'he wept bitterly' after seeing a dead snake on his path to the monastery.⁴⁹

Fr Sophrony arrived on Mt Athos to discover this tradition and dedicate his life to it. The experience of the heart ignited by the Spirit in prayer for the world was for him a 'foretaste of eternity' (*опыт вечности*),⁵⁰ a moment stolen from time, and for all souls tossed and tormented by the heavy storms of 'planetary fratricide' – a harbour of safety in the ocean of divine peace. Here true peace was the gift of the Spirit. It came with the vision of Christ himself in the manner in which he had appeared to the young Silouan. After many months in desperate and totally exhausting prayer for mercy, Silouan had 'beheld the living Christ' with 'his heart and body... filled with fire of such force that had the vision continued for another instant, he must have expired'. The vision had lasted only for a moment. And yet, as Fr Sophrony who lived with St Silouan in the last decades of his life testifies, afterwards the *staretz* had never been able to forget the 'inexpressibly gentle, infinitely loving, joyous gaze of Christ full of peace'.⁵¹

The post-Adamic status quo of constant military conflict is thus not devoid of peace. However, this reality is understood solely as a gift. Peace comes from the Spirit who inspires genuine prayer by filling the heart of God's chosen ones with Christ's own compassion for the world. In other words, in time of perennial division unity is not a utopia but a reality secured by the 'love for the enemy'. This is the message of the two Athonite monks Silouan and Sophrony. The paradoxical conclusion of these affirmations is that peace could exist even during wartime. If incompatible in ordinary human experience, peace and war may not be mutually exclusive in the life of the Spirit. Phrased differently, in the heat of perpetual war a revelation in the Spirit of the great Light of Christ would quench for a moment humanity's thirst for peace.

Such is the outline of Fr Sophrony's unsystematic discussion of war and peace which I have reconstructed from his major works. The themes are visible already in the book of *St Silouan* and remain at the forefront of his mind throughout his life, framing his autobiography *We Shall See Him as*

⁴⁹ A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, p. 373 and 95.

⁵⁰ See the Russian subtitle in A. Sophrony, *Св. Силуан*, p. 60.

⁵¹ A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, p. viii.

He Is, appearing as a recurrent theme in his lectures *On Prayer, His Life is Mine*, in his *Letters to Russia* and in the *Talks to the Community*, including the last ones given in the winter of 1992 and 1993, just a few months before his death in July 1993. This long career is marked by a consistent rejection of 'war' as 'fratricide'. The thunder of its flames deafens all human beings, making them unable to respond to their high calling to live as the image and likeness of God, the Holy Trinity. Ultimately, the grace of God is lost. Yet, even though the painful reality of war belongs to this world alone its effect could enter the realm of eternity. Beyond its destruction of millions of lives, 'strangled with incredible ferocity' as Fr Sophrony laments in the Foreword to *St Silouan*, war's grip was powerful enough to cause humanity to lose sight of its eternal destiny. This is where Fr Sophrony perceived the worst effects of war as universal despair (*отчаяние*), annihilating the 'hope' or, in the words of the Creed, the 'expectation' (*чаяние*) of eternal life.⁵² Yet for those whose lives were spared but whose hearts could never forget, this despair could become salvific if their hearts would learn, through suffering, to embrace the whole world with compassion in their prayer. Fr Sophrony's references to peace are thus in the context of his discussion of this God-given prayer for the world. Here was a peace which could never be reduced to the absence of human conflict, the cessation of fire at the fronts, which he never mentions.

To sum up: I have argued for the need to see Fr Sophrony's preoccupation with military conflict as playing a key role in shaping his theological vision. My claim is that the fratricide, suffering and despair which war causes provide a historical and theological context for his thinking as a whole, visible as an underlying frame or an external border in all his major works. The establishment of this border allows us to perceive not only the scale of his creative thinking on the topic of war and peace, which has been my principle aim so far, but also to see what distinguishes him in the great tradition of compassionate prayer to which he belongs. I shall return to this second point in the section on Vladimir Lossky where I shall seek to establish a contrast between the two precisely in the way in which war is used or not used in their theology. This comparison needs a review of Fr Sophrony's understanding of the ways of providence in history, to which I now turn.

⁵² 'Talk to the Community' on 18 November 1991, in A. Sophrony, *Духовные Беседы*, vol. 2 (Essex, 2007), p. 185.

PART TWO: DIVINE PROVIDENCE IN HUMAN HISTORY

Far from being a negative characteristic, Fr Sophrony's preoccupation with war discloses also an important positive aspect: his firm belief in divine providence and his great hope. His search for the working of providence began in Paris, in 1924, when he was still a young layman and before he left for Mt Athos.⁵³ He tells of one night which he spent in continuous prayer grieving 'for all mankind with his whole heart', complaining to God, and even reproaching him on behalf of all who suffer, known and unknown, in the 'impenetrable fog of absurdity' that had descended on the world with the eruption of the Great War.⁵⁴ However, only questions to God came out of his heart, which he later described as 'inadmissibly audacious':

Where art Thou?⁵⁵

Why didst Thou give me life?⁵⁶

Why dost Thou hide Thyself from me?⁵⁷

Why was I born?⁵⁸

How is it that God can look on indifferently at the pain and torment of millions of beings whom He Himself had created? Why does He allow the innumerable instances of brute force in the world?⁵⁹

Where is this providence that is attentive to the last detail? So why is this absurd life given to us? And lo, the soul longs to meet God and ask him, 'Why didst Thou give me life?... I am surfeited with suffering. Enveloped in darkness. Why dost Thou hide Thyself from me? I know that Thou art good but wherefore art Thou so indifferent to my pain? ... Why art Thou so cruel and merciless towards me?'⁶⁰

These passages portray the agony of a human spirit searching to discern the action of divine providence in history. His desire is to remain in conversation

⁵³ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35 and 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵⁶ A. Sophrony, *Св Силуан*, p. 3 [ET, p. vii]: 'Зачем Ты дал мне жизнь?'

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 'Зачем Ты скрываешься от меня?'

⁵⁸ A. Sophrony, *Видеть Бога*, pp. 8-9: 'Зачем я родился?'

⁵⁹ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 35.

⁶⁰ A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, 'Foreword', p. vii (modified).

with God in prayer, but this prayer is phrased as daring questions.⁶¹ He hears of the ‘unbearable torments inflicted all over the world on captive fellow creatures’.⁶² His restless spirit, is questioning the validity of the belief in God and the existence of divine providence.⁶³ Eventually, the God he was reproaching for lack of omnipotence accepted the challenge. The answer Fr Sophrony perceived coming into his heart after his quarrel with God (ссора с Богом)⁶⁴ was a voice saying:

Was it you who was crucified for them?⁶⁵

This became his own realisation of the mystery of the cross where the absolute power of Christ’s divinity was hidden in his humility. The despair caused by suffering and war had thus helped turn over Fr Sophrony’s heart and planted there the seeds of Christ-like humility and prayer for the world.⁶⁶

⁶¹ His engagement with these questions has been described as too ‘daring’ for the patristic frame of mind, N. Sakharov, *I Love, Therefore I Am*, p. 227. The wider late-antique context of the patristic understanding of providence and the belief that God is not the author of evil – as argued most notably by Basil of Caesarea – is discussed in A. Louth, ‘Pagans and Christians on Providence’, in J. Scourfield (ed.), *Texts and Culture in Late Antiquity: Inheritance, Authority and Change* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2007), pp. 279-297. See also the more narrowly patristic but still insightful contribution of Frances M. Young, ‘Insight or Incoherence? The Greek Fathers on God and Evil’, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 24/2 (1973), pp. 113-126. For a more recent presentation of the patristic voices, with a view to the later Orthodox tradition, see J.-C. Larchet, *Dieu ne veut pas la souffrance des hommes*, 2nd enlarged edition (Paris: Cerf, 2008). Again, twentieth-century military conflict is not the explicit focus of these otherwise excellent contributions.

⁶² A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 113.

⁶³ For a brief analysis of the philosophical background to these existential ideas, and in particular to the notion of ‘absurdity’, see N. Sakharov, *I Love, Therefore I Am*, pp. 227-228.

⁶⁴ A. Sophrony, *Рождение в Царство [Birth into the Kingdom]*, p. 49.

⁶⁵ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 35.

⁶⁶ He first learnt about this prayer on Athos. It happened not in church but by the coast where he met one of the old monks sitting on the rocks with a long prayer rope in his hand. He asked, ‘Father, pray for me!’ The monk answered, ‘Do you see this rope? I pull it for the whole world. I pray for the whole world. And you are there too, in my prayer’. This exchange took place three times. The old monk kindly repeating what he had said, and adding at the end, ‘But I told you that you are here. What more do you need? You are here, in this prayer which I make for the whole world’ (‘Ты здесь в этой молитве моей за весь мир’). ‘Talk to the Community’ on 28 December 1992, *Беседы*, vol. 1, pp. 285-286.

In this prayer he found a solution to the despair which humanly speaking was without solution.⁶⁷ Prepared in this way by previous experience, he arrived at the cell of his saintly elder Silouan. He accepted the revelation ‘Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not’, which Silouan had previously received, as an effective medicine against the unique despair caused by twentieth-century ‘planetary fratricide’. The ‘hell’ envisioned here was not just what one causes to oneself through personal sin. This was rather the ‘hell of repentance’ where one wept for the fall of all of Adam’s children who had become unable to live up to their high calling to know God and be his image and likeness on earth.⁶⁸ This was a failure universally present in war. The answer to the question of the working of providence was thus found in the meeting with Silouan, the ‘giant’ of the human spirit,⁶⁹ who ‘wept lest the world be deprived of the grace of the Holy Spirit’.⁷⁰

2. a) *The ‘Little Piece of History’*

When history acquired a meaning for Fr Sophrony, it was according to a principle he formulated later in his work on the Jesus Prayer: ‘The little piece of History allotted to us can and ought to be a period for us in which to assimilate being in all its dimensions’.⁷¹ The ‘little piece of History’ allotted to Fr Sophrony was such that he was able to meet and address his monastic brotherhood at the end of his life with seven decades of monastic experience behind him. During this time he had seen how the mystery of Christ is revealed in us, and how our salvation ultimately depends on our ‘sharing in his sufferings for us’.⁷² Thus, during the Second World War, we hear him speak of his own celebrations of the Divine Liturgy in the empty churches of the Athonite desert. Here, as he says, he was crying and shouting out: ‘In peace let us pray to the Lord’, on behalf all who suffer in the war.⁷³ He firmly believed that anyone who desires to bear the name Christian needed to learn ‘to bear at least a fractional likeness’ to Christ’s prayer in the

⁶⁷ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 127.

⁶⁸ A. Sophrony, *Рождение в Царство [Birth into the Kingdom]*, pp. 93-105.

⁶⁹ A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

⁷¹ A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 129.

⁷² A. Sophrony, *Видеть Бога*, 217.

⁷³ ‘Talk to the Community’ on 4 December 1991, A. Sophrony, *Беседы*, vol. 2, p. 193.

garden of Gethsemane.⁷⁴ The providential purpose of all history was to facilitate the acquisition of this prayer. In it lies the foretaste of eternity, when God's providence was to be triumphant.

In his final *Talks to the Community* Fr Sophrony returns again to the early questions which had so influenced his prayer. Although phrased as many, he was essentially asking one 'hard question' to God on the nature of his providence. In February 1993, he expresses his hope that there is indeed a possible answer: God is omnipotent. In this world of time he has chosen to veil his omnipotence with the mystery of extreme humility on the cross. However, he can reveal his sovereign power in eternity:

Our life on earth is temporary. It is not here that we reach our end, our perfection to become persons and full images of God. Yes, here is a hard question to Christ and to the Father and to the Holy Spirit...

Come and abide in us, O Holy Spirit, the Good Comforter.

Empires crumble before our eyes, millions of people die of hunger, of illness. 'Where are you, who created us?' And the Lord answers, 'This is needed for eternity'. Man was created in the image of God and in His likeness. He has to embrace with his love not just the human race but the entire creation. And the Lord rejoices when we pray for those who suffer. But He Himself delays His coming and His healing. Why? – Because he can do all things. He says, 'Do not fear those who kill the body but can do no more afterwards; rather fear him who even after killing can bring greater punishment'. This means that God is also able – even after killing and after our death – to raise us in a state of greater glory. Perhaps we shall never be the same as we experience ourselves to be in this life – deprived of love and of light.⁷⁵

In this quotation Fr Sophrony's understanding of the work of providence is summarised on three distinct levels. Firstly, this was the universal despair he had experienced in the wake of the Great War. Secondly, the awareness of the pain experienced by all those buried under those collapsing empires in the twentieth century marked his way of suffering *with* and praying *for* the world as one single being, just like Christ had prayed that 'they should all

⁷⁴ For a study of this idea, under the heading of 'hypostatic commensurability', see N. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I am*, pp. 88-89, p. 237.

⁷⁵ 'Talk to the Community' on 8 February 1993, in A. Sophrony, *Беседа*, vol. 1, pp. 315-316.

be one'. To this second level belonged also his meetings with St Silouan and the other great elders on Athos. 'ЖЫЛ ЧЕЛОВЕК' – 'there lived a man' – the historical existence of human beings like his *staretz* whose hearts were capable of praying with Christ's prayer at Gethsemane, even if only with a 'shadow of a likeness of it',⁷⁶ offered proof that the journey on which the despair firstly caused by war had placed him was in the right direction. Here was the beginning of a new life 'free from death', the life of the true human *persona*.⁷⁷ For him the entry into the presence of people who inhabited this new reality became the second manifestation of providence in the context of tragic twentieth-century military conflicts.

Yet there was another even more hidden work of providence belonging exclusively to the realm of Christian hope. 'Crucified in our world of sin', love was to be 'triumphant in eternity'.⁷⁸ To the end of his life Fr Sophrony remained committed to the apostolic faith in the Resurrection as a hope even where there is no hope – as was the case with the tragedy of war. His prayers were for the victory of providence in eternity when even those, or especially those, who had died without hope would be given to experience Christ's love for them, and invited to embrace it. A key person he included in this last category was his own sister Alexandra who had lived and died outside of the household of the Christian faith.⁷⁹ Thus, in Fr Sophrony's prayer the tears of blessed despair caused by the destructive forces of war were mixed with

⁷⁶ See Fr Sophrony's last 'Talk to the Community' of 8 April 1993 ('Прощальная беседа'), in *Беседы*, vol. 1, p. 324.

⁷⁷ The key principle of the *persona* is discussed in N. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I Am*, pp. 71-76.

⁷⁸ A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, p. 228.

⁷⁹ Before her death, his sister Alexandra had a vision in which she heard their mother say how much she desired all her children to die as believing Christians. Fr Sophrony expressed great hope that his sister would indeed convert to Christ, and do so 'with joy': '... наша бедная Шура... не постигала путей Божиих и в погоне за человеческой правдой отвергла правду Божию. Но теперь, оказавшись в условиях возможности видеть, что Бог силен и по смерти дать человеку полонту жизни и блаженства, она просто с радостью пойдет Ему навстречу'. *Письма в Россию [Letters to Russia]*, pp. 130-132 (132). For a summary of the universalist trajectory in the Orthodox tradition, see M. Kallistos Ware, 'Dare We Hope', and M. Hilarion Alfeyev, 'Eschatology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, eds. M. B. Cunningham and E. Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 107-120 (Silouan is cited on p. 118).

the joy of a desperate hope in the power of the resurrection. This is how he later recalled his years on Mt Athos:

Almost every day after the liturgy I knew a feeling of Easter joy. And strange as it may seem, my constant prayer like some volcanic eruption proceeded from the profound despair that had taken over my heart. The two seemingly totally incompatible states met together in me. I am recording the fact. I did not understand what was happening to me. Outwardly, I was no less fortunate than other people.⁸⁰

A Pentecostal *glossolalia* confronts the reader of his books: ‘Χριστὸς ἀνέστη!’ – the Easter greeting in the ancient tongue of his Orthodox church is echoed by responses in his adopted mother tongue of war-torn Europe – *malgré tout!*⁸¹

2. b) Fr Sophrony and Vladimir Lossky

We have now examined the topics of war and peace, and of divine providence. I selected my proof texts from Fr Sophrony’s entire corpus beginning with the opening page of his book *St Silouan*, first published in 1948, through to his last *Talks to the Community* from the winter 1992-1993. I have argued for the need to acknowledge the central role played by this problematic in his theology. We can now enlarge the scope of our enquiry by comparing Fr Sophrony to one of his most influential twentieth-century compatriots, Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958). The two men worked together for a decade in Paris after the end of the Second World War and the examination of their theological views remains a fruitful avenue for further research.⁸² In what follows, I shall briefly review their engagement with the problematic of war. The contrast will help us to identify more clearly the distinctiveness of Fr Sophrony’s contribution.

As is well known, Lossky’s main concern was to present a ‘living witness’ of universal Orthodoxy to Christians in the West, and particularly in France.⁸³ He devoted all his energies to this task with remarkable vigour. His ancestors

⁸⁰ A Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 40.

⁸¹ I am paraphrasing passages such as ‘победа сия неизбежна’, and parallels in his *Письма в Россию [Letters to Russia]*, p. 80, p. 102, p. 124 (emphasis in the original).

⁸² The context of their collaboration is given in N. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I am*, pp. 28-33.

⁸³ Frank S. Alexander, *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 173.

had been knights, who had taken part in the crusades, and he saw himself as a 'knight of the twentieth century'.⁸⁴ What he desired most of all was a new articulation of the Christian faith which would remain faithful to its ancient origins. Of importance here was the 'close link' which, as Lossky clarified, 'always exists between the dogma which the Church confesses and the spiritual fruit which it bears'.⁸⁵ Indeed, despite the somewhat misleading title – as if 'mysticism' narrowly understood is all that matters – Lossky's whole project can be seen as a defense of his thesis that 'spirituality and dogma, mysticism and theology are inseparably linked in the life of the Church'.⁸⁶ Lossky's theological agenda is similar to the one formulated in 1948 by Fr Sophrony as a summary of the aspirations he had of his own first book *St Silouan*:

Each new book which claims to inclusion in the teaching of the Church is considered from every aspect and especially with regard to the influence it may have on the lives of men. This last criterion – its influence – is extremely important because of the close connection between dogmatic consciousness and life. The Church accepts nothing contrary to, or inconsistent with, the spirit of Christ-like love on which she feeds.⁸⁷

Here the full agreement of our two authors qualifies them for inclusion in our discussion. Despite their similar thoughts on the close connection between Christian theology and Christian living, Vladimir Lossky does not share Fr Sophrony's concern with the workings of divine providence in the context of military conflict. The subject is indeed absent from Lossky's major works. He reserved his reflections on war for the pages of a private diary where he recorded his experience during the Nazi occupation of France in June 1940. The diary remained unpublished until 1998, when it appeared under the title *Sept jours sur les routes de France*.⁸⁸ Here Lossky appears in a

⁸⁴ Lossky's motto was: 'Revendiquer la justice pour soi-même, c'est se dégrader. Il faut la vouloir pour les autres'. See the recollections of his son Jean Lossky, 'Humanité de théologien', *Sept jours sur les routes de France*, p. 73.

⁸⁵ See the 'Introduction' to his *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), p. 21.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸⁷ A. Sophrony, *St Silouan*, p. 89.

⁸⁸ Lossky's family did not wish to publish the diary for fears that the theologian might be claimed by right-wing activists. The text appeared posthumously, and after the end of the

new light. He speaks of 'crusades' and 'holy wars' and of the *gallicinium*, or the universal Christianity under the old kings of France, which he believes would again become possible after the war.⁸⁹ He expresses his conviction that if war shrinks the earthly borders of his beloved France, it can also help to direct her back to the lives of its ancient Christian ancestors, and with them – to the 'living waters' of faith. There were refugees from all possible backgrounds on the train he boarded to Le Blanc on 17 June. Likewise this imagined conversion was to be universal, and not 'nationalistic': it was to include people from all nations united in one Church on the territory of France.⁹⁰ Yet, for Lossky, this wake up call to spiritual renewal for the Church in France did not include a call to non-violent resistance. He saw, in fact, two possible ways of resistance – the military and the spiritual. He was not himself opposed to the first. Recording how he watched the air battle at Chabris of 16 June, he wrote of experiencing a certain 'joy' connected with a 'youthful and manly attitude, noble and loyal to both life and death'.⁹¹

Lossky's was not to be a fighter but an exiled Parisian on the way to Orleans. He reached the city just after it had been bombed. Entering the abandoned cathedral he was met with a strange sight: an old man, dressed in black, was walking around the ancient church and, waving his long hands, was shouting at the statues of the saints:

'And you? And you? Is it that you can't, or that you do not want to help us?'⁹²

This dramatic scene left a profound impression on Lossky. He believed that the old man was not mad, but possessed by a sincere faith which enabled him to reproach God and his saints with such boldness. He was, we may say, a man of the spiritual resistance. The conclusion to Lossky's article 'Dominion

USSR, as V. Lossky, *Sept jours sur les routes de France. Juin 1940* (Paris: Cerf, 1998). For the circumstances of publication see the Préface by Nicolas Lossky. Abridged English translation in Alexander, *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity*, pp. 211-215.

⁸⁹ V. Lossky, *Sept jours*, p. 69.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47: 'Si la vue des bombardements des villes est pénible et déprimante, la vue d'un combat réjouit, créant une attitude jeune et courageuse, noble et loyale devant la vie et la mort'.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

and Kingship: An Eschatological Study' gives a fuller picture of his thought on the struggle to resist evil:

We know that the gates of hell shall never prevail against the Church, and that hell's power, shattered by Christ, remains unreal so long as our will does not make common cause with that of the enemy of our final vocation. The Church strives only for the realisation of this final goal set before all creation. All other conflicts in which we are obliged to take part in this world are restricted to the interests of a group, a party, a country, a human ideology: they inevitably exclude and sacrifice our enemies. Here, however, no one is excluded or sacrificed: even when the Church takes action against men, it is still for the salvation of these men that she continues to strive.

This is the guiding principle of her struggle, and its field extends ever wider as our eschatological involvement becomes more intense. But what is this intense involvement if not sanctity realised? It is said that St Isaac prayed not only for the enemies of the truth but also for the devils. This is only possible at a spiritual height where man already participates in the secret of the divine Counsel. In spite of some allusions in St Paul, the question of angelic eschatology remains inaccessible to our theology... But let us not forget, in the presence of the awesome countenance of Christ the Judge, that the supreme prerogative of a King is mercy.⁹³

In contrast to Fr Sophrony, Lossky is clear that on this earth there will be conflicts during which the exclusion of enemies will be inevitable. The final exhortation to remain conscious of the mercy of Christ, the Judge of all, places Lossky firmly in the tradition of St Isaac's compassionate prayer. What for Fr Sophrony had been the 'taste of eternity' was for Lossky eschatology which 'becomes present'. Here the political opposition between 'friend and enemy' is finally overcome but only in human beings like St Isaac, or Mary the Theotokos, who were 'capable of cooperating in the divine plan'.⁹⁴ Thus, the Gospel command to 'love the enemy' is reserved for the spiritual height of the saints of the ancient church. Lossky's faith that their heirs would walk

⁹³ V. Lossky, 'Dominion and Kingship: An Eschatological Study', in J. Erickson and T. Bird (eds.), *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir Seminary Press, 1974), pp. 211-228 (226-227). Originally published in A.M. Allchin's translation in *Sobornost*, 3, no. 14 (1953), pp. 67-79.

⁹⁴ V. Lossky, 'Dominion and Kingship', p. 224.

again the paths of France inspired him to end his diary with a note on repentance and hope:

[These roads] opened for me the treasures of most painful suffering, and the boundless hope shining in the depths of utmost despair. They taught me to see the providence of God where one would only see a pure coincidence. They disclosed to me that the ways of God are not our ways, even though we are called to follow them as the saints of the past had done....

‘Lord, why do you chastise France, and not other countries?’

‘I chastise those whom I love; be zealous in the faith and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock.... You shall be my apostles of the last times.’⁹⁵

We can see here Lossky remembering with gratitude what he had learnt on the roads of France. The message of the Notre Dame de La Salette evoked in the reference to the ‘apostles of the last times’ is a message of hope: there will be people who will have the courage to respond to Christ’s call, and through repentance to recover the ancient faith in the world of today. Lossky rendered thanks for all this and here his similarity with Fr Sophrony is very pronounced.⁹⁶ Both authors emphasise the connection between faith and life and stress the crucial importance of repentance for all, without distinction. Yet, Lossky also recognised the existence of different ways of Christian life – the one where the enemy is ‘excluded’ and the other where he is ‘loved’. This discussion is marginal to his work and is restricted mainly to his *Seven Days on the Roads of France*. Here Lossky is clearly different from Fr Sophrony who, as we have seen, never tires of expounding on the topic. Lossky is different also in the way in which he maintains that we may be obliged to take part in military conflicts.⁹⁷ Fr Sophrony had reached a markedly different conclusion.

⁹⁵ V. Lossky, *Sept jours*, pp. 67-68.

⁹⁶ Compare Fr Sophrony speaking of a feeling of ‘gratitude to God’ for the calamities of the First World War and even ‘for the agonising idiocy of everything that was happening’, in A. Sophrony, *On Prayer*, p. 78.

⁹⁷ The connection between theology and the life of the church, where the ‘ecclesial experience of God is acquired’, is emphasised as important for Lossky in the biographical sketch by N. Lossky, ‘Theology and Spirituality in the Work of Vladimir Lossky’, *The Ecumenical Review*, 51 (1999), pp. 288-293 (at pp. 290-291). The article is based on the talk given at the monastic community of Bose, Italy, in September 1998, at the time when the book *Seven Days on the Roads of France* was just being published. It is significant that it does not discuss war as a theological factor for V. Lossky.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper's aim was to demonstrate Fr Sophrony's uniquely consistent attention to the problem of twentieth-century military conflict. As he never wrote an extensive treatise on this topic, the argument relied on collecting passages from his entire corpus, including a number of sources existing only in Russian, to show how the themes of war, peace and providence remain a constant preoccupation throughout his life. One of the central findings of the research is the consistent rejection, throughout his long life, of war as 'fratricide'. Indeed, this key concept can be seen as framing his first book, *St Silouan*, and his autobiography *We Shall See Him as He Is*, as well as appearing as a recurrent theme in his *On Prayer, His Life is Mine*, his *Letters* to his family and friends in Russia and in the *Talks to the Community*, including the last ones given in the winter of 1992 to 1993, when he was 97 years old, just a few months before his death in July 1993.

The insight gained from this examination directs our attention to a central detail in Fr Sophrony's biography, his departure from the Holy Mountain in 1947.⁹⁸ It would seem that the 'various circumstances'⁹⁹ which he mentions as his reason for leaving the Mountain cannot be seen in isolation from his view that there is 'no worse sin than war'.¹⁰⁰ The monks whose confessions he heard during the war did not share his views, as he later complained to Fr Boris Stark in the Easter letter of 1966. For his part, he reiterates his own theological position in the 1948 'Foreword' to *St Silouan*, in his other writings and letters and, most succinctly, in the 'Epilogue' to his autobiography published in 1985. The comparison between the Easter letter and these texts reveals his remarkable consistency on this central issue. The only difference between the private letter and the printed books is that the latter suppress the revealing detail of his experience as a confessor speaking of repentance for moral complicity in the crime of murder to his fellow monks, many of whom came from the ruling Greek monasteries on Athos. Given his preoccupation with the problem of nationalism we can understand why he did

⁹⁸ On Fr Sophrony's difficulties as a non-Greek in postwar Greece, but without a reference to his own attitude to the war, see N. Sakharov, *I Love, Therefore I Am*, pp. 28-29.

⁹⁹ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

not include this confidential information in works he later published for wider circulation. The monastic world in which he lived had long been suffering under the oppressive breath of what he used to call, with a smile, the ‘spirit of the Dardanelles’.¹⁰¹ For example, at the turn of the twentieth century, the conflicts between Greek and Slav monasteries on Athos had been, to quote the sympathetic assessment of Sir Steven Runciman, ‘far from edifying’.¹⁰² As Fr Sophrony was to testify in his letters to Balfour immediately prior to the eruption of the war, the level of the tensions four decades later had certainly increased.¹⁰³ After three years in the Athonite desert, he was ordained a priest in February 1941, at which point he also undertook the responsibility for the spiritual guidance of many monks. His call for repentance and love for the enemy thus coincided with the Nazi invasion of Greece and the ensuing mass starvation of 1941–1942. His relentless emphasis on the issue of moral complicity in war must have contributed to the creation of those ‘various conditions’ which finally made it impossible for him personally – and not just as one of the many Slav monks on the Mountain – to remain there.¹⁰⁴

In the context of the past century, however, the experience of one Athonite monk who reached France alive after the war is surely only a drop in the ocean of enormous human suffering. That, it would seem, was certainly Fr Sophrony’s own attitude to the events and hence he never properly discusses the details of his departure. Instead his concern is with the untold suffering of humanity as a whole.¹⁰⁵ One should not forget that, even today, in the

¹⁰¹ ‘L’esprit dardanellique’, in *Buisson Ardent*, 10 (2004), p. 65.

¹⁰² S. Runciman, *The Great Church in Captivity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1968), pp. 409–410.

¹⁰³ ‘Quitter le Mont-Athos ou le monastère m’est impossible. Si je suis chassé par les Grecs ou par quelques autres circonstances, alors beaucoup de choses changeront; mais j’espère que le Seigneur et la Mère de Dieu nous garderont de ce malheur’. A. Sophrony, ‘Lettre à David Balfour (VIII)’ dated 23 October / 5 November 1932, in *Buisson Ardent*, 18 (2012), p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Malade, troublé dans son *bésychia* par le climat anti-slave qui règne au mont Athos, il quitte la Sainte Montagne pour la France en février 1947’, such is the assessment of M. Egger in his ‘Archimandrite Sophrony (1896–1993), moine pour le monde’, in *La Prière, expérience de l’éternité*, p. 17. The official blessing to leave was granted with a letter by Vatopedi Monastery, according to Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou’s opening chapter ‘Εισαγωγή στη θεολογία του Γέροντος Σωφρονίου’, in *Γέροντας Σωφρόνιος*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁵ A recent estimate for the period after the end of WW2 until 2008 gives some 313 conflicts of various types worldwide with a number of casualties estimated at 92 million,

twenty-first century, the wounds from the time of the two wars – the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire,¹⁰⁶ or the Poles under Soviet domination¹⁰⁷ – still await healing. Yet we live at a time when secret archives are being opened and discussions of painful past events are conducted in search for reconciliation. Scholars always need to discuss where and how their authors lived and especially how the painful experiences in their lives contributed to their formation. Thus, Fr Sophrony's engagement with the problem of war deserves to be studied for its own sake. It must be analysed first in its own Athonite context and then in comparison with the views of other Russian and non-Russian theologians. The present paper has attempted to make a first offering in this direction.

As far as the Russian context is concerned, there seem to be at least two main areas which deserve further exploration. The first is Fr Sophrony's concern with the unity of humanity which rings a distant echo of the philosophical theses of Solov'ev and his followers.¹⁰⁸ Here is a shared mystical desire for pan-unity, which is constantly undermined by the ubiquitous experience of human pan-enmity.¹⁰⁹ However, the discussion offered by

most of them non-combatants, cited and discussed in M. Cherif Bassiouni, *Crimes Against Humanity: Historical Evolution and Contemporary Application*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ On the Armenian genocide law passed by the French Senate in January 2012, see <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16677986> (accessed 24 November 2014).

¹⁰⁷ For a comprehensive account of the Katyn Forest massacres, see now A. M. Cienciala, N. S. Lebedeva, and W. Materski (eds.), *Katyn: A Crime Without Punishment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). For the British side of the story, see 'British reactions to the Katyn massacre, 1943-2003', with a Foreword by the Minister for Europe, Denis MacShane (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2003).

¹⁰⁸ It is already in Solov'ev's dissertation *A Critique of Abstract Principles* (1880) that we see the existence of human pan-unity (всеединство) defined as a philosophical counterpart to the idea of divinity. Solov'ev's two works most relevant for our topic on war and peace are his *Lectures on Godmanhood* and his *Three Conversations Concerning War Progress and the End of History* with the *Short Story of the Antichrist* (1899). The influence of Solov'ev on Fr Sophrony is both direct and indirect, mainly through Fr Sergius Bulgakov, as argued by N. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I am*, p. 16 and 20.

¹⁰⁹ Solov'ev called this a 'radical suffering' (коренное страдание) and linked it with the 'impossibility of actually being everything while yet remaining in one's own exclusiveness'. *Lectures on Godmanhood*, 9, translated by G. Kline in J. Edie et al. (eds.), *Russian Philosophy* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1965), vol. 3, p. 77. Russian original in *Чтения о богочеловечестве* (Санкт Петербург: Художественная Литература, 1994), 'Чтение девятое', p. 153.

Fr Sophrony differs from Solov'ev's early theocratic or later eschatological proposals.¹¹⁰ The argument for a relationship between war, providence and compassionate prayer for the world should be seen as Fr Sophrony's unique contribution.¹¹¹ The second area is the emphasis on the humility of Christ, which is manifested in the supreme act of love on the Cross. Here, Fr Sophrony is heir to a whole generation of Russian theologians who had written on the 'humble Christ'. Nadezhda Gorodetsky has given ample material for comparisons in this direction¹¹² and Andrew Louth has also briefly investigated the topic.¹¹³ Yet, the connection with war as a theological problem has not been sufficiently explored.

After the vertical there is also space for a horizontal comparison. What I mean by this is that as war became a truly universal problem in the twentieth century, one would expect that others outside the tradition to which Fr Sophrony belonged would have come to express compatible views. Here is a research avenue of significant promise. I am thinking in particular of the work of padre Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy and others with similar war-born inspiration, like Jürgen Moltmann or Kazoh Kitamori. There can be no question of direct dependence here. Yet the similarities are striking: suffering as an entry into the way of Christ the Crucified God, unabated hope in the power of the Resurrection, knowledge as participation in being through love, and, finally, supreme confidence in the effectiveness of the Eucharist, which Kennedy saw as the only medicine against the 'absolute moral stupidity of war', the 'pure, undiluted, filthy sin' of humanity.¹¹⁴ Arguably, the explanation

¹¹⁰ Or from similar more recent proposals, as the one advanced by I. W. Charny for an International Peace Army sponsored by a world government to prevent mass murder, see his 'Requiem for the Prevention of Genocide in Our Time: Working toward an Improbable Possibility but Not Giving Up', *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 7/1 (2012), pp. 108-122.

¹¹¹ My reflection here is indebted to the generosity of Dr Brandon Galahar who kindly shared his draft paper on 'The Justification of the Good and the Evil of War: Vladimir Solov'ev and the Role of Providence and Christology in the Eastern Orthodox Ethics of War'.

¹¹² N. Gorodetsky, *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought* (London: SPCK, 1938). For a comparison with Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, see Sr Philareta, 'Le Métropolitain Philarète de Moscou (1782-1867)', *Buisson Ardent*, 8 (2002), pp. 93-105 (p. 100 on despair as the loss of faith in the resurrection).

¹¹³ A. Louth, 'Tradition and Innovation', pp. 195-200.

¹¹⁴ Padre Kennedy's phrases in *After War, Is Faith Possible?*, p. 14, p. 62. For a contemporary application of these ideas, see W. Cavanaugh, *Torture and the Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

for these important parallels could be in the shared influence exercised upon theology by the universal misery caused by twentieth-century military conflict. In his excellent analysis of the importance of the First World War in American religious history, Jonathan Ebel has spoken of the religious experience of ‘powerlessness’ in front of the ‘combat numinous’.¹¹⁵ The terminology here is similar to the one envisaged by Rudolf Otto. However, the original schema is inverted: the numen is man-made, and humility is seen, by Fr Sophrony, Kennedy and Moltmann, as ‘lying at the heart of the Godhead’.¹¹⁶ An apt summary of this theological axiom is given in the phrase attributed to Archbishop Michael Ramsey, ‘God is Christ-like, and in Him is nothing *un-Christ-like* at all’.¹¹⁷ As for Fr Sophrony, this Christocentric theology had a clear political relevance, cornered as it was on an absolute rejection of ‘fratricidal conflict’:

The manifestations of pride are innumerable but they all distort the divine image in man. Outside Christ, without Christ, there is no resolving the tragedy of the earthly history of mankind. The atmosphere reeks with the smell of blood. Day after day the universe is fed with news of the slaying or torture of the vanquished in fratricidal conflict. Black clouds of hate screen the heavenly Light from our eyes. People make their own hell for themselves. Unless and until we allow repentance to change us totally there will be no deliverance for the world – deliverance from the most terrible of all curses, war. Better be killed than kill is the attitude of the humble man of love [cf. Matt. 10:28; 5:21-22].... Our spirit dwells in a state of grateful delight when the Holy Mystery, which transcends the created mind, is revealed to us: the Living God with Whom we may converse.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ J. H. Ebel, *Faith in the Fight. Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 68-75. With reference to Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, tr. by J. Harvey 2nd ed. (New York: OUP, 1958).

¹¹⁶ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 29: ‘God is *humility*’. I am citing the assessment in A. Louth, ‘Tradition and Innovation’, p. 200.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in D. Dales et al. (eds.), *Glory Descending: Michael Ramsey And His Writings* (London: Canterbury Press, 2005), p. 248.

¹¹⁸ A. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, p. 31.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of 'war' as the human sin 'par excellence' and argue that its overcoming is a key motive in the theology of Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, twentieth-century Russian Orthodox theologian and ascetic. Seldom addressed in the growing number of academic and/or spiritual studies dedicated to him, war appears as problematic already on the first page of his first book *St Silouan the Athonite* (1948). Defined as 'fratricide' and denied any legitimacy, war remains a commanding force behind the entire theology emerging on the pages of Archim. Sophrony's books. In the 1920s, as a young Russian émigré in Paris, he discovers the oneness of humankind as a reaction to the tragedy of the First World War. In the 1940s, living as a hermit in a cave on the cliffs of Mt Athos in Greece, he cries out in prayer against the slaughter of the Second World War. In his last works, published posthumously in England, he laments his powerlessness against this greatest of evils. Structurally, Part One of the paper is an analysis of the ways in which Fr Sophrony uses the terms 'war' and 'peace'. Having defined the key terms, I move, in Part Two, to his understanding of the workings of divine providence. Here my analysis is enriched by a comparison with Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), a personal friend and colleague of Archim. Sophrony's in Paris. The paper is built around large citations of texts, many of which are offered here for the first time in English translation. The conclusion contextualises the findings of the paper within the larger Orthodox tradition and indicates possible avenues for further research.