

A Tragic Estrangement: Reading the Florovsky-Schmemmann Correspondence

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Thoughtful readers will feel some melancholy upon finishing *On Christian Leadership: The Letters of Alexander Schmemmann and Georges Florovsky (1947–1955)*, but this should not discourage anyone from reading this good book. Universally acknowledged as theologians of the first order, Fathers Alexander Schmemmann and Georges Florovsky left significant legacies. Each produced a sizable collection of writings that has become an object of scholarly study. To say that they were successful is an understatement. Yet this book is ultimately a testimony of failure: the failure of their relationship, which made it impossible for them to work together to achieve their aspired goals. This failure also had an adverse effect on Orthodox Christianity at large. Although their mutual thoughts about an expansive and enlightened Orthodox ecclesiology were in the formative state, the letters show their enthusiasm and confidence in the prospect of actualizing such ideas in the fertile fields of North American Orthodoxy. Sadly, those ideas saw only partial acceptance and limited implementation.

The book itself is a notable success. Some could quibble about minor inconsistencies and certain personal pronouncements, but the editor and translator, Paul L. Gavrilyuk, deserves credit for his dedicated scholarly work. He is an ordained deacon

of the Orthodox Church in America, a professor at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and the author of a number of books on theology, including one on Georges Florovsky. This book is for the most part a translation of Gavrilyuk's 2019 publication of the Schmemmann–Florovsky letters in Russian. His achievement is extensive: he performed detective work in uncovering the letters, transcribed them, arranged them in sequence, provided explanatory footnotes, and compiled a timeline of events and a detailed biographical index. He also wrote a comprehensive introduction. Gavrilyuk clearly immersed himself in the project. He became familiar with the early lives of Florovsky and Schmemmann, their meeting, the nature of their relationship, and the trajectories of their lives over the eight-year period spanned by the correspondence. He also gives us a summary of their lives afterward, and shares his thoughts about how to understand the unique “tones” in some of the letters.

Gavrilyuk writes of the “eureka” moment when he stumbled upon Schmemmann's first letter to Florovsky while doing research in the Princeton University Library. It was “an exhilaration akin to that felt by those seeking gold in the Klondike.” This led him to seek out Florovsky's letters to Schmemmann in the library at Saint Vladimir's

Orthodox Seminary. Gavriilyuk's hope that his "great delight" in finding these golden nuggets will extend to readers was not in vain. Schmemmann and Florovsky's reputations as brilliant theologians alone make the opportunity of reading their personal correspondence exhilarating. The letters themselves do not disappoint, covering many subjects. There are astute observations about Orthodox Church life in Europe and America, sharp vignettes and wickedly funny characterizations of famous theologians, and also some of the most profound thoughts produced by Orthodox theologians in the twentieth century. Even the mundane matters are interesting, such as details about the Schmemmann family and their relocation to America. The "gossipy" passages, mostly from Schmemmann to Florovsky about notable Orthodox clergy and professors at Saint Sergius Institute in Paris, will fascinate some and bore others. Neither correspondent was immune from making strong, sometimes caustic, judgments. Many of these funny and biting observations are, as Gavriilyuk puts it, "an unpleasant caricature." Their tendency to write trenchant assessments of colleagues may have ultimately contributed to their rupture.



Both very gifted, Fathers Alexander Schmemmann and Georges Florovsky were on the verge of making history together just as the twentieth century reached its midpoint. It was providential that Florovsky, older and already recognized as a world-renowned theologian, would impress the young, eager, and ambitious Schmemmann. Their personal relationship became intense and lasted nearly a decade. As fascinating as it is, the circumstances of its collapse stand out as especially nota-

ble. For those who were in any way interested in or connected to Orthodox theological education in America during the mid-twentieth century, the rupture was a tragic watershed. Today, with very few living witnesses to those events and no known written recollections, this book will become the go-to source for anyone interested in knowing what happened.

The letters begin in 1947, with Florovsky in New York at the recently opened Saint Vladimir's Seminary. The first eleven letters in the collection are from Schmemmann who, thirty years Florovsky's junior, is eager to impress and endear himself. While too young to have been Florovsky's student at Saint Sergius Institute in Paris, Schmemmann had certainly read his magnum opus *The Ways of Russian Theology*, which left a marked effect. Schmemmann's first letter, written after a positive encounter at an ecumenical meeting, displays an eagerness to impress, yet not without humility. "Meeting you is so valuable because of all the theologians I feel you to be the most congenial. Certainly, I am not yet a theologian, but my vague theological 'tendencies' find their expression precisely in your theology. Historicism, Christological and sacramental ecclesiology, the eucharistic nature of the Church—those categories have always been on my mind." Today this passage seems prophetic, as Schmemmann's own theological legacy turned out to be concerned with precisely those terms.

Schmemmann's letters are striking in their reverential, almost obsequious tone. "A lyrical finale: I miss you . . . communications with you, our conversations, and your advice. . . . Perhaps we will see each other soon, . . . many things are difficult without you, and my constant dream is to work



Fr. Georges Florovsky (seated, second from left) with faculty and students in the early years of St. Vladimir's Seminary. OCA archives.

with you, side by side, under your direct supervision." This tone is all the more significant because his characterizations of the older professors at Saint Sergius Institute are often quite harsh; some are "insufferable", others have "an inability to understand theology," still others are simply "a disaster." In this, it seems Schmemmann was augmenting Florovsky's own opinions of these professors. A fascinating parallel is that the young Florovsky once wrote similarly ingratiating letters to Pavel Florensky, from 1911 to 1914.¹ Florovsky, like Schmemmann years later, went out of his way to impress the brilliant theologian-philosopher with his intellect and aspirations. Schmemmann would not have known anything about those letters, and Florovsky probably preferred to forget them, given his subsequent sharp rejection of Florensky's theology.

Gavrilyuk's introduction to *On Christian Leadership* describes how, after World War II, the atmosphere at Saint Sergius began to change. For about fifteen years, it was unquestionably

the premier Orthodox theological establishment in the world, but the war had a devastating effect on it, as on everything else in Europe. Florovsky had been a professor there, but he was not in Paris during the war and could only return in a limited capacity afterwards. This is why he went to America. Schmemmann himself began his studies at Saint Sergius in 1940, and after his marriage and ordination, was expected to remain as an instructor. However, with his new ideas—some of which were inspired by Florovsky—Schmemmann, as well as other young scholars such as John Meyendorff and Serge Verhovskoy, did not see eye to eye with the older professors. When Florovsky found himself at the nascent Saint Vladimir's Seminary, it made perfect sense for him to solicit Schmemmann's assistance. There were already some other "refugees" from Paris there, such as Nikolay Lossky and George Fedotov, but they were old and frail. With the arrival of Schmemmann, Verhovskoy, and Meyendorff, Saint Vladimir's eventually became the direct recipient of the mantle of Saint Sergius Institute.

¹ Eight of these letters were published in *Исследования по истории русской мысли* 6 (2004): 51–69.

The letters reveal much about the correspondents' thoughts and feelings, but even in what is unsaid we can see evidence of deeper psychological currents. We can relate to the exuberance of Schmemann's early letters, charged with his youthful aspirations and exciting prospects. Then reality set in. After accepting Florovsky's proposal, Schmemann hoped to begin teaching in 1950, but personal setbacks delayed his arrival in New York until June 1951. Florovsky became almost obsessively impatient with these delays. For the Schmemanns it was a major event: leaving family in France, preparing children for the journey, traveling to America with great hopes but little security—and of course there were the matters of immigration and packing (in one letter, Father Alexander despairs of choosing which books to take!). This delay precipitated tensions between the two. Florovsky's irritation and anxiety are evident. After a period of several months when he did not respond to Schmemann, the latter wrote somewhat apologetically, "I greet you on the occasion of the approaching holidays and although you are obstinately silent, I believe that we will pass these days in one mind and love."

After he reached America, there surely must have been joyous moments between them and their families. But the letters reveal how quickly any such sentiments vanished. Just six months after his arrival, Schmemann wrote to Florovsky, "I decided to write you a letter rather than speaking with you so that you could consider my letter calmly before you respond. Over the last several days, I have felt especially strongly the need for us to clarify where we stand vis-à-vis the matters concerning the seminary." Few details emerge, but the tension is evident. Most of the letters that follow

take the form of memos between faculty colleagues.

What happened? How could such a deep bond of collegial fellowship dissolve so quickly? The letters provide some indications. To fill in gaps, we have relevant material in Gavriilyuk's introduction along with Andrew Blane's biography, *George Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman* (1993). A generally accepted interpretation is that Florovsky, who was raised and trained according to the high standards of the European academic and intellectual tradition, sought to impose the same upon the students at Saint Vladimir's. This generation of somewhat carefree American boys was not accustomed to such demanding standards. Florovsky did not recognize the problem—or chose to ignore it—and evidently expected Schmemann to toe the line. Schmemann, younger and himself affected by postwar sensibilities, quickly ascertained that Florovsky's expectations were both unreasonable and unnecessary. "We are training and educating future priests, not scholars," he wrote.

Tense though relations were, the two did not part ways immediately. Both were sympathetic to Orthodox participation in the ecumenical gatherings in Europe. Similar engagements in America kept them working together. They were present at the 1954 assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, where Florovsky was a key speaker. By the end of the 1954–55 academic year, however, the relationship was so strained that Florovsky told Schmemann and his family to vacate their seminary apartment. But things worked out differently. Moved by the grumbling and complaints from students and staff as well as with Florovsky's own superciliousness, the Council of Bishops of

the Russian Orthodox Greek-Catholic Church of North America (the future Orthodox Church in America) released Florovsky from his deanship. He rejected their offer to stay as a professor and left altogether.

I knew people who were eyewitnesses to these events. Some former students have shared colorful reminiscences and anecdotes that are probably better off in the dustbins of history. Many who studied with Florovsky recall him as difficult, but no one disrespected him. A few who were loyal to Florovsky saw his leaving as unfair and harbored enmity towards Schmemmann. Some took neither side, regarded both with admiration, and saw the break-up as the kind of thing that happens sometimes. It seems reasonable to accept Schmemmann's insight that Saint Vladimir's Seminary's primary purpose was the education and training of those who studied at the seminary in the 1950s became outstanding Orthodox pastors. It should be noted that even though he considered Florovsky's rigid criteria excessive, Father Schmemmann and other Saint Vladimir's professors consistently held the seminary to high academic standards. Gavriilyuk assesses the situation philosophically: "Both Florovsky and Schmemmann, out of necessity, operated in the rather limited intellectual space of emigration, and neither could fit within its narrow confines. As a sociological phenomenon, a 'nuclear reaction' between the two greatest Orthodox theological minds of their time was nearly inevitable, given their leadership ambitions and their psychological incompatibility."

Their working relationship came to an end, and their very few subsequent encounters were tense, but each surely had the other on his mind. When

Florovsky died in 1979, Schmemmann went to the funeral and wrote about it in his journal. He remembered the earlier years with nostalgia. He also recalled writing a letter to Father Georges in 1968, a peace offering with hopes of re-establishing contact. This letter is the last one in the collection and stands apart in poignant dignity. Written to congratulate Florovsky on his seventy-fifth birthday, Schmemmann hoped for reconciliation. "I want you to know that for me, as long as I live, there can be no greater joy than the restoration in Christ and by Christ's grace, which washes away everything and conquers everything, of our relationship, which in its ultimate depth was based on him alone. Whether or not this comes to pass I leave for you to decide. For my part, I am prepared at any moment, at your convenience, to do anything that you may find necessary." Florovsky never responded. In his introduction, Gavriilyuk included the account of a friend of Florovsky who was at his side when he was dying. Slipping in and out of consciousness, Florovsky at one point sat up in bed and said, "Perhaps you should also invite Schmemmann here!" Those were his last recorded words.

As tragic as their estrangement was, both Schmemmann and Florovsky achieved a great deal, inspired countless students, scholars, and priests, and will remain enshrined in the pantheon of Orthodox theology. Florovsky ended up teaching at Harvard and Princeton, participated in many academic and ecumenical forums, wrote much, traveled the world over, and enjoyed those years immensely. It is fair to speculate that his life would have been more or less the same without Schmemmann. The latter, on the other hand, was greatly affected

by Florovsky. When Florovsky died, Schmemmann wrote in his journal that he had “played a significant role, both positive and negative, in my life.” Elsewhere, Schmemmann frankly acknowledged Florovsky’s profound contribution to Orthodox theology. The most important way that Florovsky affected Schmemmann was serendipitous. Schmemmann’s initial desire was to become a scholar of the Byzantine Church. He was preparing a doctoral dissertation about Saint Mark of Ephesus. As Florovsky was the foremost authority in that field, Schmemmann’s early letters convey his desire for guidance. Even in planning to relocate to New York, Schmemmann saw himself teaching church history. However, Saint Vladimir’s Seminary needed someone to teach liturgics, and this is what Florovsky asked Schmemmann to take on. Schmemmann agreed, and came to realize there was promise in studying liturgics in a new, unexplored way. In a letter dated January 2, 1951, he writes that the field is wide open, and “there is much work to be done. I envision a proper (complete)

course as follows: a general introduction to liturgics with a definition of the *method* of liturgics (its connection with the history of religions and church history, the nature of worship, understanding of comparative liturgics, service books, texts, and so on), then specifically Christian worship, as the heart and source of church life and of the Church itself. . . . it is not enough for the graduates of the academy to know the archeological data; the Church must become alive for them in worship.” We see here the kernels of what would become Father Alexander’s singular breakthrough, a major reassessment of Orthodox liturgical theology. In time, his first love for Byzantium would recede, and in fact he would come to regard all “imperial” influences on church life negatively.

The title of the present collection, *On Christian Leadership*, is misleading. Whether it was the editor’s or publisher’s call, it would have been better simply to follow the Russian version, *Prot. Alexander Schmemmann—Prot.*



Fr. Alexander and Juliana Schmemmann on the day of his ordination to the priesthood, November 30, 1946.

Georges Florovsky, Letters 1947–1955. There is little among the letters that is directly about Christian leadership. Yes, Florovsky showed Christian leadership in his goals for Saint Vladimir’s Seminary, and he was prescient in envisioning Schmemmann’s role there. But ultimately, as the letters reveal, this is the story of a *failure* of Christian leadership, a failure in the sense of an ancient Greek tragedy, where a few characters’ minor flaws in judgment lead to dramatic consequences for many. As Gavrilyuk states, the split between Florovsky and Schmemmann may have been inevitable. To arrive at a complete understanding for its reasons may ultimately be impossible. Yet one cannot help lamenting the fact that these two Christian leaders could not find the means to combine their talents in joint Christian leadership. If there is a moral lesson in these letters, it may be the words from Proverbs: “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established” (Prov. 19:21).

Perhaps the real “failure” is that their vision for Orthodox Christianity in the twentieth century had limited impact. Both Florovsky and Schmemmann were motivated by a persistent sense that in encountering modernity, Orthodoxy faced new challenges that required new ways of thinking and theologizing. In this Florovsky was a pioneer, notably in his book *The Ways of Russian Theology*, where he disclosed the erroneous influences of “scholasticism” on Orthodox theology. His critical assessments of Russian theology shocked the old guard of Russian theologians in Paris but energized young thinkers such as Schmemmann. Although they did not outline programmatic solutions, their letters are imbued with the urgency of change.

They shared a conviction that the forced expatriation of Orthodox theologians to the West was a blessing, even if its circumstances caused pain and hardship. The historically Orthodox realms—Russia, the Middle East, the Balkans, Byzantium—were captives of a conditioned paralysis, but the West was free and open for engagement with modernity. The mid-twentieth century was a period of tremendous scientific and social change, and Christian theology, including Orthodox theology, could not remain unaffected. Both Florovsky and Schmemmann were active in ecumenical movements, and used such gatherings for personal advancement and theological enrichment. Both men were comfortable in dialogue with the non-Orthodox, which scandalized “traditional” Orthodox. Their ecumenical activity was motivated by the recognition that Orthodox theology is, in fact, catholic. In a 1949 letter, Schmemmann laments that the designations of East and West, which both Orthodox and non-Orthodox use in reference to each other, are a distorted misinterpretation. “In Orthodoxy, the non-Orthodox seek and the Orthodox offer, instead of the catholic heritage of the Church, of the entire Church, some sort of peculiar East, *âme slave* [Slavic soul].” He sees Florovsky as the voice of conscience and the leader of this enlightened thinking. “In this regard it would be very good if you, as today’s universally recognized leader of Orthodox theology, were to write a programmatic paper—a manifesto of sorts—regarding the contemporary task of Orthodox theology in which you would clearly and distinctly demonstrate that it is necessary for ‘Orthodox’ theology itself to return to the ‘catholic’ heritage of the one and not only ‘Eastern’ Church, and demonstrate how harmful the ‘Orientalist’

excitement is both among the Orthodox and non-Orthodox.”

In spite of the great impact that Florovsky and Schmemmann have had on the Orthodox Church, they are not universally held in high esteem. Many contemporary Orthodox theologians and clergy are either disdainful or indifferent toward them. Some regard them as radical reformers, even heretics—Schmemmann probably more than Florovsky. But the two men remain powerful witnesses of inspired Orthodox theology for our times. For many, they are proof that Orthodox Christianity is truly a living tradition that exists to make participation in the Kingdom of God possible here and now. For those who love the Orthodox Church’s theology, worship, and traditions, and who accept the fact that this twenty-first century world is also the world Jesus Christ came to save, there remains a melancholic sorrow that the theological vision of Orthodox Fathers Georges and Alexander shared and hoped to see come alive is mostly something to read about and discuss with friends.

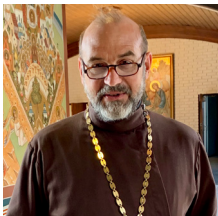
On January 27, 1950, Schmemmann responded to a curt letter from Florovsky, who had rebuked his younger colleague for what appeared to be hesitancy in coming to Saint Vladimir’s. Schmemmann wrote to assure Florovsky that he was completely committed to the move and was proceeding as fast as humanly possible. His letter ends with this striking passage:

Finally, you and, I hope, I together with you will in the near future begin a *big undertaking*, not as adventure, nor an emigrant enterprise, but something infinitely deeper. We will lay down new pathways, a return to the sources in new circumstances. It is possible that the *whole future of Orthodoxy* depends upon this undertaking. This particularly obliges me to take this step [of coming to America] with full responsibility and, I would say, *spiritually* and *ascetically*. I accept it with my whole soul, but I would like to do it as well as I can. This is not a matter of a six-month delay. I feel, and I want you to believe me, that I must come to you in the fullness of my abilities and having fully *completed* my preparation, as I understand all of these past years. Father Georges, the encounter and relationship with you have played a decisive role in my life. I would like you to take my letter seriously. I will be awaiting your response, hoping that the task that unites us is stronger than the misunderstandings for which I entirely blame myself, although without any ‘plots.’ Christ is in our midst.

With love,

Priest AS

In fact, it was another eighteen months before Schmemmann arrived in America. But that “big undertaking”? Alas, it is yet to come. ✽



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