



EAST MEETS WEST

Ways of Contemporary Orthodox Theology in the West

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Introduction

When one claims to represent the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this implies that one is following a specific set of hermeneutical presuppositions of the common tradition. All Christian traditions share the same basic sources in the first millennium, so the definition of a theology as “Orthodox” is necessarily related to a specific point of view, to concrete presuppositions, when approaching this common tradition. One such widely recognized special feature of Orthodox theology is its frequent strong emphasis on the patristic heritage (up until the fifteenth century), which somehow marks its distinctive character as *the* formative factor of its identity. In the subsequent period of almost five centuries to the

present, Orthodox theology in general faced a long period of oppression under the Ottoman regime, resulting in a strategic defeat, which has been characterized as a “Babylonian captivity” or “pseudomorphosis.”

During this period, which extended until the first decades of the twentieth century or even later, Orthodox theology seemed to follow uncritically Western (Roman Catholic or Protestant) scholastic models, obscuring its own particular identity and losing its distinctively patristic character. This resulted in most cases in a robust conservatism and anti-Westernism, in a catastrophic self-referentiality, and a departure from the challenges posed by ongoing history (of salvation)—issues that can still be traced in many facets of

subsequent modern theology. During the long Ottoman occupation, the so-called Orthodox world (Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, etc.) did not have the opportunity to undergo the transformations of the landmarks of Western intellectual history (such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, etc.).

In order to better understand the real flourishing of Orthodox theology during the last century, it is necessary to bear in mind a few basic influences on its early history, important for its development.

Historical Landmarks of Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology

The Bolshevik Revolution (1917–1918)

Although most of us are aware of the various consequences and implications of this great historical event on the political, social, and intellectual history of Europe, its theological impact, though indirect, is something that passes almost unnoticed. However, had the Bolshevik Revolution never occurred, it could be argued that the map of the whole of modern Orthodox theology would be quite different. Without the rise of Communism, especially in Russia, Russian émigré theology would not have been possible.

The First Congress of Orthodox Theology, Athens, 1936

This First Congress of Orthodox Theology, held in Athens in 1936, with the presence of eminent figures such as Georges Florovsky and Sergius Bulgakov, was a groundbreaking event for the future of Orthodox theology. It signaled an attempt by the world-

wide Orthodox theological elite of that period to liberate theology from the so-called “Babylonian captivity” of Western and scholastic influences, to recover its genuine Orthodox and *ecclesial* ethos through, and by appealing to, the Fathers.

The 1990s and the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

The 1990s would signal a new and quite different development in Orthodox theology. On the one hand, a serious revival of a deep scholarly interest emerged regarding the previously neglected, if not unofficially condemned, sophiological tradition as it was articulated by Vladimir Solovyov and especially Sergius Bulgakov in the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, it was the period when many Orthodox theologians would begin to reflect on the need for the social-political engagement of Orthodoxy in an open ecumenical dialogue with the major Western Christian traditions. This development culminated most explicitly in a conference widely recognized as a sequel to the 1936 First Congress, which was recently held in Greece in 2010, organized by the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in cooperation with Fordham University and many other Orthodox institutions and university faculties on the provocative topic: “Neo-Patristic Synthesis or Post-Patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology Be Contextual?” The basic goal of this latter development was to challenge the normative patristic character of academic Orthodox theology, which, despite the achievements and developments of earlier generations, tends to limit its scope to a merely historical way of doing theology and studying past documents or traditional relics, dealing primarily with purely histor-

ical-theological issues (intra-ecclesial issues, doctrinal issues, etc.), while avoiding opening theology to a creative dialogue with current social and political movements, science, and society and the living culture of our time.

Aspects of the Synthesis Between the Mystical and the Political in the Contemporary History of Orthodox Theology

During the major part of the twentieth century, it was widely recognized in Orthodox scholarship that there were two major, almost mutually exclusive, trends in Orthodox theology, the so-called “Neo-patristic” theology represented by Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky, and the “Russian school” represented primarily by Solovyev, Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky. These two central trajectories of Orthodox theology were a result of the Russian intellectual diaspora in the West. Notwithstanding their common cultural and historical roots, a deep and often hostile separation was considered as the basic attitude and framework within which the eminent figures of both trends developed their theological outlook and program during the subsequent years.¹

Chronologically speaking, the foundational figures of the Russian school precede their Neo-patristic colleagues, and they represent a more or less comprehensive worldview, under the rubric of Sophiology. If this is true for the Russian party, the image of the Neo-patristic school is more complex than it seems at first sight,² with whom there is a greater variety of visions and methodological presuppositions that cannot necessarily be labeled within the same Neo-patristic rubric. At the same time, today, the alleged radical

distinction between the Russian and the Neo-patristic school is being seriously reconsidered and reenvisioned as an oversimplification.³

The *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra* Dialogue with Modernity and Post-modernity

In what follows I would like to present concrete cases from both the Russian Religious Renaissance and Neo-patristic theology that account for a creative and very interesting dialogue with various aspects of modernity and post-modernity. For this reason, I am going to use as a methodological tool (in accordance with the distinction between the mystical and the political), a distinction proposed by Paul Valliere between “Church Dogmatics” and “Church and World Dogmatics.”⁴ In our perspective, the concept of “Church Dogmatics” is primarily related to a theology proper (the mystical aspect of theology per se), in other words to a theology *ad intra*, in terms of classic dogmatics, while the second one (the political aspect of theology) is intended to express an open-ended theological reflection on secular issues, or in other words a kind of systematic theology in the current sense of the term. In this respect, the central axis of this article, presented as a synthesis between the mystical and the political, coincides naturally with the above distinction in terms of theological methodology, since the mystical could be easily identified with the “Church Dogmatics” branch, while the political, with “Church and World Dogmatics.”⁵

“Church Dogmatics”: The Mystical

Undoubtedly any attempt at theologizing must be premised on the first principles of the divine, specifically Christian, discipline. A deep divergence emerges on this point between

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, “Russian Theology: 1920–1972: An Introductory Survey,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 16 (1972): 172–194; Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bucharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (London: T&T Clark, 2000).

² See Georges Florovsky, “Review of *The Mystical Theology of Eastern Church*,” *Journal of Religion* 38:3 (July 1958): 207–208.

³ Kallistos Ware, “Orthodox Theology Today: Trends and Tasks,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12:2 (2012): 105–121; Paul Gavriluyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Valliere, 306–309.

⁵ See more in my “Is a Dialogue between Orthodox Theology and (Post)modernity Possible?” *Communio Viatorum* LIV:11 (2012): 203–222.

the Russian and the Neo-patristic trends. On the one hand, Russian theology, and particularly Sophiology, begins its reflection from the world in order to develop its theological vision. According to its premises, God cannot be thought of apart from the world, insofar as the God of the Christian faith is a “God for us.” Without avoiding frequent and extended speculation about the inner being of God, Sophiology’s desire is to keep God and the world in a very close relationship (“all-unity”) through Sophia.

On the other hand, Neo-patristic theology attempts to preserve the absolute gap, the absoluteness of the ontological difference between uncreated and created. In order to secure the absolute transcendence of God, this school insists on a theology of *creatio ex nihilo* and on the contingency of the world, with the ensuing freedom for both God and the world that derives from this hiatus. For instance, Lossky, as is well known, bestows on apophatic theology an almost absolute primacy in theological discourse, in order to preserve God from any kind of conceptualization, while Zi-zioulas, closer on this point to Florovsky, emphasizes the necessity and importance of the absolute dialectic between created and uncreated for Christian theology. However, while it seems paradoxical that theological discourse is only possible by virtue of God’s self-revelation, in a few cases, such as for Zi-zioulas and perhaps Stăniloae, speculation on the inner being of God is justified in light of the Eucharistic experience of God’s Trinitarian life, a vision that provides a balance between the cataphatic and apophatic aspects of doing theology, rendering theology justifiable. But for Lossky, at least in his early work, this

kind of theologizing is rejected outright.

It seems natural then that Sophiology is located closer to modern culture, which reacts against religious authority and heteronomy in favor of an absolute immanence of life and the ensuing dignity and self-reference of human beings and the world. For that purpose, a kind of “humano-theology” (a theology of the humanity of God), which “expresses the Word of God but it speaks human words as well... in a creative sense” is presented as the only legitimate kind of religious discourse to the modern world.⁷ This religious philosophy seems to fit better into the context of secularized modern society, (characterized by human autonomy and self-referentiality). Evaluating this perspective from the angle of Valliere’s twofold typology, one could add a third type, that of “World Dogmatics,” as a sort of secular theology, having as its starting point the common existential concern of humanity, and its deep and honest longing to reach its outward truth as it is finally manifested in the man Jesus.

However, given the overall return of religion to the public sphere during the last decades of late modernity or post-modernity, the Neo-patristic School, in my estimation, will be more beneficial than these, inasmuch as it proposes a theological justification of God in and for the world, and not merely the other way around. Moreover it could be added that the prevailing argument of many post-modern thinkers (such as Derrida, Marion, etc.) concerning the absolute and radical *différence* between God and the world finds its similarities in the absolute dialectical relation between created and the uncreated, as expounded in light of the patristic

⁷ Ibid., 307.

tradition by Florovsky and more successfully by Zizioulas. Moreover, the modern or post-modern Christian tension between transcendence (cf. Barth's early dialectical theology) and immanence (secular theology, cf. Vahanian et al.) is a reality that Orthodox theology is challenged to face. The renewal of interest in the analogical-dialogical dimension of the God-world relationship as the core of both theological trends could be a corrective step beyond any sterile dichotomization. In this perspective, my view about a "World Dogmatics" way of doing theology could be useful for modern Orthodox theology in its attempt to address the existential need of the current world.

"Church and World Dogmatics": The Political

Many of the early Neo-patristic scholars were educated more or less as historians, while none of the representatives of the Russian school were primarily interested in historical concerns. In contrast, they were professional philosophers (Berdyayev), economists (Bulgakov), and biblical scholars (Bucharev). This is an important difference, which presents the Russian School as initially more open and oriented to secular culture, supporting the vital engagement of Orthodoxy with the modern world and its experience. However a brief overview of the works of the thinkers of both streams demonstrates that most of them have a serious interest in how to bring the good news of the Gospel into soteriological dialogue with the urgent existential needs of each time. From the Neo-patristic school, let us consider titles such as Meyendorff's *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World*, Schmemann's *Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Russian Religious*

Thought, Florovsky's "The Social Problem of the Orthodox Church," and Zizioulas's eco-theological essays. The theologians and scholars who came into dialogue with the modernization of Russia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attempted to engage in a deep dialogue with intellectual and ideological movements, such as Socialism and Marxism, in the lands of origin, and with the emergence of human rights. They also attempted to respond to the challenge of how to conceptualize and experience traditional faith and the Church's life in liberal, democratic, and even *laïque* conditions, as for example in France.

Social issues were the first priority of all the émigré theologians and philosophers in their attempt to counter Western liberalism and capitalism with a fresh Christian socialism rooted in the social insights of the Gospel (see for instance the work of Bucharev, Florovsky's essay on St. John Chrysostom, and several works by Berdyayev) or an alternative philosophy of economy with a special and Christian understanding of labor as a way to go beyond dialectical materialism and reorient the material world to its divine roots beyond a mere self-referential and self-sufficient understanding (cf. Bulgakov's "Philosophy of the Economy"). In this respect, the well-known insight of the human being as the "priest of creation," particularly as articulated through its sophiological mediation by Zizioulas, according to which the created order should be oriented by humanity's priestly efforts toward a communion with its Creator, should be presented as a very important and also critical proposal of Orthodox theology to the modern and post-modern environmental and ethical impasses.

Although Florovsky seems not to have been interested explicitly in social issues, he did write two ad hoc articles on this topic, articulating a theology of labor based on the ascetical and social dimension of the Orthodox understanding of the human being. At the same time, his strong emphasis on history and human responsibility and struggle (*podvig*) against evil toward the transformation of the world could count as a positive attitude in relation to the immanent and secular concerns of the everyday life of modern and post-modern humans as well. In any case, in both theological schools, the integrity and the dignity of the human being and the world is more or less taken as a given due to the *ex nihilo* and *ex amore* Christian doctrine of creation.

Conclusion: Challenges of the Twenty-first Century

Let us now briefly turn to two challenges that modern Orthodox theology needs to address today by formulating a coherent synthesis between the aforementioned mystical and political aspects of doing theology.

First, concerning the existential interpretation of Christian faith. Unless an attempt is made to find the proper hermeneutical means and tools for a deep and fresh existential reinterpretation of the basic elements of our tra-

dition, Orthodoxy will not have any future. The people of our age need to hear specific answers to concrete questions and problems they are called to deal with. In other words, modern Orthodox theology should open itself to a constant dialogue with the real problems and concerns of the people of our age, attempting to find what the Fathers would have to say in similar situations. In this case, the existential concern (following Zizioulas's reasoning), something common to all ages and all the people, could easily become the common framework of the encounter and the deep dialogue between theology and world.

A second challenge that modern Orthodox theology should seriously have to take into account is the historical commitment. It has become a common accusation on behalf of the Western Christian tradition that Orthodoxy does not pay the necessary attention to history and the social-political issues, something implied in its metahistorical, more eschatological (see liturgical) perspective. While this is true to some extent both historically and theologically, and despite the positive signs that one could discern during the past and recent history of Orthodox theology, a comprehensive and serious engagement in political theology is something that is still lacking in the current theological curricula. ✱



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