

Three Twentieth-Century Retrievals of Patristic Theology: Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, and Alexander Schmemann

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In order to understand where Orthodox theology is going in our century, it is crucial to understand where it was in the previous century¹. This paper contributes to this process of self-understanding by exploring the main paradigm of the late twentieth-century Orthodox theology, namely, neopatristics. Specifically, I am looking at three émigré theologians who worked within this dominant paradigm: Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, and Alexander Schmemann. There is a tendency to treat neopatristic theology as something problem-free and monolithic. After all, hasn't Orthodox theology always claimed its continuity with the heritage of the Church Fathers? Isn't the appeal to the Fathers a default for any Orthodox theology worthy of the name? As we will see in a moment, the matter is not as straightforward. This is the case for two main reasons. First, the neopatristic theologies of Florovsky, Lossky, and Schmemann were polemical stances as much as they were also constructive proposals. Second, while broadly speaking they operated within the same neopatristic paradigm, they offer three distinct approaches to neopatristics with significant differences.

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1. See An. Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present Day*, Inter Varsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL 2015; C. Emerson, G. Pattison, and R. A. Poole, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 2020. Some material from my chapter 31 in the Oxford handbook was incorporated in this essay.

I proceed in three main steps. First, I sketch out the polemical context of the neopatristic paradigm. Second, I describe the main building blocks of three neopatristic theologies and compare them, bringing out their differences. Finally, I reflect on the abiding significance of neopatristics. This paper builds upon my monograph, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*², now available in the Greek translation³.

The mastermind of the neopatristic paradigm in twentieth-century Orthodox theology was Georges Florovsky. One might, of course, search for his predecessors in the nineteenth century. I am not persuaded by the argument that he simply continued the historical mining of patristic writings, associated with the translation project of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow. There is no question that this translation project, which included all four graduate schools of theology in the Russian Empire, rendered the writings of the Church Fathers accessible in modern Russian language. The project resulted in many solid historical studies but did not influence the study of dogmatics or contemporary Orthodox theology. Perhaps the main exception is the five-volume Russian edition of the Greek *Philokalia*, which spurred a revival of ascetical spirituality not only among the monastic elders but also among the laity. However, *Philokalia* is the exception that proves the rule.

Florovsky's appeal to "return to the Church Fathers" was more than an invitation to dust off the volumes of the translations of patristic writings in the seminary libraries and subject them to further historical investigation. In fact, the focus of his "return to the Church Fathers" was not historical research but a reform of modern Orthodox theology. The thrust of his "return to the Church Fathers" was polemical. In November 1936, Florovsky participated in the First International Congress of Orthodox Theologians in Athens and read two papers. The first paper, "Western Influences in Russian Theology" identified a problem. The second paper, "Patristics and Modern Theology", offered a solution. According to Florovsky, the main problem with modern Orthodox theology, as practiced in Russia and Ukraine, was

2. First ed. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 2013.

3. P. L. Gavrilyuk, 'Ο Γεώργιος Φλωρόφσκι καὶ η ρωσική θρησκευτική ἀναγέννηση', transl. N. Asproulis, ed. Ekdotiki Dimitriados, Volos 2022.

its subjection to corrupting western influences. In *The Ways of Russian Theology* already finished and published in 1937, Florovsky described a decline of modern Russian Orthodox theology under the Roman Catholic (particularly “scholastic”), later Protestant, and subsequently German Idealist influences. He characterized this development using Oswald Spengler’s term, “pseudomorphosis”. In Florovsky’s use, the term meant a cultural and theological distortion, preventing organic change and development. I should add, that Christos Yannaras interpreted the nineteenth-century Greek Orthodox theology in Florovskian terms, also as a narrative of decline as a result of following the paradigms of scholastic and western theology. Florovsky’s positive argument, made in the second paper read in Athens, “Patristics and Modern Theology” was that to recover its authentic expression contemporary Orthodox theology needed to “return to the Church Fathers”.

These two impulses, the critique of western influences and the re-reading of the Church Fathers in light of contemporary theological problems, are the main forces that brought twentieth-century neopatristic theology into being. Before I proceed any further, it would be helpful to clarify the function of the prefix “neo” in “neopatristics”. The difficulty here is that Florovsky himself has never treated the subject systematically. The closest that we come to the definition of “neopatristic synthesis” is in his so-called “Theological Will”, which Andrew Blane found among Florovsky’s papers after his death. Here is the definition:

I [Florovsky] was led quite early to the idea of what I am calling now ‘the Neo-Patristic Synthesis’. It should be more than just a collection of Patristic sayings or statements. It must be a *synthesis*, a creative reassessment of those insights which were granted to the Holy Men of old. It must be *Patristic*, faithful to the spirit and vision of the Fathers, *ad mentem Patrum*. Yet, it must be also *Neo-Patristic*, since it is to be addressed to the new age, with its own problems and queries⁴.

This succinct statement requires some unpacking. First, we can date Florovsky’s first impulse to return modern Russian theology to “the

4. A. Blane (ed.), *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual, Orthodox Churchman*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1993, pp. 153-4; emphasis and capitalization in the original.

land of the Church Fathers” to his Eurasian period, more precisely to an essay finished in early 1922⁵. Second, Florovsky maintains that patristic sources should not be used as mere proof texts, as they tended to be used in the Russian Orthodox theological manuals of the nineteenth century. In this specific sense, Florovsky resisted Orthodox “scholasticism”, which was a term that he used quite loosely. Instead of a collection of proof-texts, the task of Orthodox theology is rather a *synthesis*. The term synthesis, which Florovsky rarely elaborated, could also mean different things. It could mean a theological synthesis achieved in a particular historical period. For example, John of Damascus’s tractate *On the Orthodox Faith* offered a synthesis of Orthodox theology in the eighth century. Florovsky uses the term “synthesis” in this sense in his historical studies of the Church Fathers, although his emphasis lies elsewhere. In this instance, Florovsky understands synthesis as a “creative reassessment” of the Fathers by a contemporary Orthodox scholar. When the English translation of Lossky’s *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* was published, Florovsky praised this publication as the most successful contemporary instance of “neopatristic synthesis”. As Schmemann observes, Florovsky himself never came up with anything as systematic as Lossky’s work because “the historian in him [Florovsky] seems to have been more articulate than the theologian”⁶.

If Florovsky meant a *contemporary* synthesis, what kind of a synthesis did he have in mind? Florovsky remained ambivalent about the force to be given to the prefix “neo” in “neopatristic synthesis”. On the one hand, in his “Theological Testament” he speaks of a “creative reassessment”. He maintains that the *neo*-patristic synthesis needs to address itself to the problems of our age rather than focus on the problems of purely historical character. Hence, he was also opposed to what he called a “theology of repetition”, which treated all theological problems as settled once and for all. Today we would use the term “traditionalism” for such a theology. Jaroslav Pelikan defined traditionalism as the “dead faith of the living” and contrasted it with tradition, which is “the living faith

5. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky, op.cit.*, p. 74.

6. Schmemann, “*In Memoriam Fr Georges Florovsky*,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 23 (1979), p. 133.

of the dead”⁷. For Florovsky, patristic tradition was certainly the living faith of the dead rather than the dead faith of the living. The attempts by some traditionalists to co-opt Florovsky’s work do not do justice to his legacy.

On the other hand, Florovsky should not be mistaken for a revisionist. For him, the rigorous historical investigation of patristic sources should not lead to relativizing the theology of the Church Fathers. He maintained, for example, that the main patristic theological categories, such as the ones deployed in the creeds and the authoritative statements of the councils have an abiding value. These categories of what he called the perennial philosophy of “Christian Hellenism” cannot and should not be superseded. For Florovsky, neopatristic theology cannot be post-patristic; Orthodox theology cannot supersede the Church Fathers but approaches contemporary problems in a manner “faithful to the spirit and vision of the Fathers, *ad mentem Patrum*”. Florovsky understood authentic theologizing as a process of entering into and acquiring the mind of the Fathers.

Florovsky does not elaborate what the process of acquiring patristic mind could mean in practice. The process is not about mere information (i.e. reading a lot of patristic texts) and more about formation and transformation. According to Florovsky, “the spirit and vision of the Fathers” are preserved and transmitted in the liturgical experience of the church. Hence, to acquire the mind of the Fathers is to participate in this ecclesial experience. The category of ecclesial experience is central to Florovsky’s neopatristic synthesis. Several influential Orthodox theologians from Lossky to Schmemann to Zizioulas have reappropriated this category in their presentations of neopatristic theology with different inflections.

In terms of its content, Florovsky’s neopatristic synthesis was predicated on two major elements: the historical Christ and the intuition of creaturehood. By the “historical Christ” Florovsky did not mean the search for the historical Jesus. He meant rather conciliar Christology as articulated in the Chalcedonian Definition. As for the intuition of

7. Pelikan, public lecture in Collegeville, Minnesota (USA) in the fall of 2001; oral account.

creaturehood, it stood for the ontological difference between the uncreated God and creation, as articulated by the orthodox Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus and Athanasius. For Florovsky this insight was valuable not only in the ancient controversies against Gnosticism or Arianism, but in the present-day discussions of Russian sophiology, as developed by Sergius Bulgakov.

In my monograph, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*, I argued that many of Florovsky's discussions of the Church Fathers have Bulgakov's sophiology as its polemical subtext. Why would this be the case? For two main reasons. First, according to Florovsky, Bulgakov's account of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, was not sufficiently Christocentric. In other words, the tendency of sophiology was to replace the unique mediating role of Christ with that of Sophia. Second, sophiological ontology tended to undermine the "intuition of creaturehood" by emphasizing the eternal foundation and the transfigured reality of the world "in" God. Florovsky argued that sophiological speculations were a form of pantheism, connecting it genetically to Origenism and German Idealism.

The polemical impulse behind Lossky's neopatristic theology was similar to Florovsky's. In the circles of Parisian emigration, Lossky became known as the author of *The Sophia Debate*⁸ the target of which was the sophiological system of Bulgakov. Florovsky criticized Bulgakov privately and obliquely (through his lectures on the Church Fathers at St Sergius Institute in Paris and his public lecture in Great Britain). Lossky, in contrast, launched a public and direct critique, which could cost Bulgakov his academic position at the St Sergius Institute. Lossky was equally concerned about the pantheistic tendencies of sophiology as well as what he saw as the system's Gnostic elements, particularly the speculations about the inner life of the trinity. Lossky's impulse to recover the apophatic dimension of Orthodox theology has Bulgakov's bold kataphaticism as its polemical subtext.

Positively Lossky was profoundly inspired by the theological vision of the sixth century theologian who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite. For Lossky apophatic theology was more than a theory of religious language, which stipulated how finite descriptions

8. "Spor o Sofii", in Russian, 1935.

applied to the infinite God. Lossky's apophaticism was an existential attitude and a religious epistemology. Apophatic theology is a method of purifying the mind of the cognitive idols of God, it is the shedding of all concepts in the mystical union that is "beyond knowledge".

For Florovsky, Lossky's apophaticism went too far. According to Florovsky, the main categories of Greek patristic theology were "verbal icons of God", which had an abiding value. Verbal icons should not be cast aside as mere idols. To ravel in the knowledge that is beyond knowledge is to acquiesce in pious agnosticism.

While Florovsky provided a chapter-length treatment of Dionysius's theology in his lectures on patrology, constructively Fr. Georges made little use of Dionysius or of mystical writers in general. He intended to write a sequel to the *Eastern Fathers of the Fifth-Eighth Centuries*, finished a solid chapter on Photius of Constantinople, but could not bring himself to write a similarly extensive treatments of Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas. In contrast to Lossky, Florovsky's engagement of Palamas remained ad hoc and almost entirely based on the studies of John Meyendorff (who is rarely given due credit, when Florovsky's 1959 essay "St Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers" is discussed). If Florovsky's neopatristic synthesis can be graphically represented as a circle with the center being the Chalcedonian Christology, Lossky's neopatristic theology is more like an ellipse with two foci: Dionysius and Palamas. Lossky described his own work as a "Palamite synthesis".

Both theologians emphasized the significance of *ecclesial* experience in contrast to private forms of mystical experience. In *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Lossky insisted that the Eastern Christian tradition successfully harmonized mystical experience and dogmatic theology. Florovsky would agree that such a harmonization was an important desideratum, but that in reality modern Orthodox theology departed from the liturgical experience of the church, which resulted in *pseudomorphosis*. For Lossky, the main paradigm for religious experience was not Eucharistic communion but mystical union in which the functions of the senses and the intellect were folded and surpassed.

Another element that differentiates Lossky's neopatristics from Florovsky is the function of the third person of the trinity. Florovsky's neopatristic synthesis is decidedly Christocentric with the result that

the Holy Spirit often takes the backstage. For Lossky, pneumatological questions were front and center. For example, Lossky held that the “question of the procession of the Holy Spirit has been the sole dogmatic grounds for the separation of East and West”⁹ and went so far as to derive the doctrine of papal primacy [*sic*] from Filioque. Florovsky sensibly objected that the claims to high papal authority had been made before Filioque became an issue. In contrast to Lossky, Florovsky saw Filioque as a questionable theologoumenon (authoritative opinion) rather than a church-dividing issue. As a historian, Florovsky was concerned more about the ‘actual association, rather than the logical deduction of ideas’¹⁰.

Both Florovsky and Lossky tended to emphasize the unity, coherence, and continuity of patristic thought and downplayed the differences and tensions between the Church Fathers. They approached patristic sources with the hermeneutic of trust and charity; in contrast, they approached the theology of their Russian contemporaries with the hermeneutic of suspicion.

Both theologians had extensive ecumenical experience at the meetings of the Society of St Alban and St Sergius in Great Britain. For both, the heritage of the Eastern Fathers was a point of departure in the ecumenical dialogue with the Anglican and Catholic theologians. Both used their ecumenical platform as means of Orthodox Christian witness at the time when Orthodox Christianity was virtually unknown in the West.

Both came from the families that left the Soviet Russia after the Bolshevik Coup of 1917. They were exiles. Their neopatristic theology was exilic, it promised a return to “the land of the Church Fathers” at a time when a return to their homeland became impossible and when their church back home was being destroyed by the repressive machine of the Soviet state.

Alexander Schmemann belonged to the younger generation of those who were born in exile. Schmemann accepted Florovsky’s premise that in order to recover its own voice, Orthodox academic theology needed to reconnect with ecclesial experience. However, Florovsky

9. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 2001, p. 71.

10. Florovsky, Letter to S. Sakharov, 15 May 1958, in S. Sakharov, *Perepiska s protoiereem Georgiem Florovskim*, Sviato-Troitskaia Sergieva Lavra, Sergiev Posad, Russia 2008, pp. 80-81.

was somewhat unsystematic in unpacking the precise content of this experience. For him, the paradigm seems to have been the meeting of Christ in the Eucharist. For Schmemann, liturgical experience will become the primary source of theological reflection. In addition to Florovsky's neopatristics, Schmemann was also influenced by Nicholas Afanasiev's Eucharistic ecclesiology, epitomized in the statement that "the Eucharist makes the church". For Schmemann, a "return to the Church Fathers" meant primarily a retrieval of patristic theology and practice of worship, especially as presented by the Church Fathers of the first five centuries. In the spirit of patristic theology, Schmemann emphasized the eschatological dimension of worship. As he explained in his classic work, *For the Life of the World* (1970), liturgy from the beginning to the end was a movement towards the kingdom that culminated in the Eucharistic banquet with the Messiah. Schmemann contrasted this understanding of the liturgy with some questionable aspects of Byzantine liturgical theology, especially a tendency to indulge in artificial symbolic explanations of liturgical action. Schmemann was critical of the type of liturgical commentary that one could find, for example, in Dionysius's *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, for its erasure of the historical dimension and its absence of the Christological focus. Such a criticism of Dionysius makes a striking contrast with Vladimir Lossky's appropriation of Dionysius as a figure of focal importance for neopatristics. Moreover, by questioning the normative status of a 'Byzantine synthesis' and 'Christian Hellenism', Schmemann also sharply parted ways with Florovsky.

Conclusion

To conclude, I surveyed three versions of twentieth-century neopatristic theology. I pointed out that the main polemical backdrop to Florovsky's and Lossky's version of neopatristics was Bulgakov's sophiology. Positively, we have three distinct appropriations of the patristic heritage that have different theological inflections.

The retrieval of patristic thought bore significant fruits. First, it offered a robust foundation for rebuilding Orthodox theological identity. Second, it provided a theological alternative to religion nationalism. Finally, it

supplied a respectable point of departure for ecumenical exchange. The neopatristic paradigm remained dominant until the end of the twentieth century. In order to move forward, we need to take a full account of the paradigm, appropriating it critically and constructively.