

Tradition, Patristic Theology and Traditionalism in Modern Orthodoxy

By Paul Ladouceur*

Tradition and the Nature of Theology in Modern Orthodoxy

Orthodox theologians of all persuasions accept the importance of tradition in the theology and the life of the Orthodox Church. There is nonetheless a wide range of views on what tradition is and the significance of tradition, especially the theology of the ancient Fathers of the Church, for modern Orthodox theology. Major differences of approach to tradition became apparent in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the most fundamental distinction between the theologians of the Russian religious renaissance of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century and later neopatristic theologians may lie in their attitudes towards the Fathers. What is the status of the patristic tradition in modern Orthodoxy? What is the authority of the Fathers? Beyond the realm of what is clearly dogmatic as enunciated notably in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and other dogmatic pronouncements of ecumenical councils, are the teachings of the Fathers normative, authoritative beyond question, or are they indicative, guidelines in orientating contemporary theological reflection?

For the theologians of the Russian religious renaissance, the thinking of the Fathers on non-dogmatic issues is a helpful, even indispensable guide to theological reflection, but not an absolute norm – the Russian thinkers were prepared to look elsewhere than the classical Fathers for inspiration to bring Christ's message to the modern world. For the later

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neopatristic theologians and many of their successors, patristic theology constitutes an indispensable source and norm for all theology. The initial fault line on tradition, especially the standing of the Fathers in Orthodox theology, between the religious renaissance and neopatristic theology was articulated by Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944) and Fr. Georges Florovsky (1893-1979). For Bulgakov, a strong patristic scholar himself, the writings of the Fathers must be seen first and foremost historically:

The writings of the Holy Fathers in their dogmatic proclamations must also be understood within their historical context. One must not apply to them a meaning that is not inherent in the nature of the problems they were actually concerned with. One cannot seek in the writings of one period answers to the questions inherent in another. In any case the writings do not possess a universality applicable to all periods in history. The writings of the Fathers are historically conditioned and therefore limited in their meaning.

At the same time, patristic writings have a significant status in the Orthodox tradition, but they are not at the same level as Scripture:

This does not prevent them from having an eternal value insofar as they are woven into the dogmatic conscience of the church, but it is important to establish that the writings of the Fathers are not the Word of God and cannot be compared to it or made equal to it [...]. We say this not to diminish the authority of the Fathers of the Church but so that this authority may be taken for what it is [...]. The Fathers' writings cannot be accepted blindly as bearing dogmatic authority; they must be analyzed comparatively and critically¹.

For the neopatristic theologians, the thinking of the ancient Fathers is largely considered an absolute norm for all subsequent theology, and an appeal to any other philosophical or theological is suspect if not rejected outright. In contrast to Bulgakov's cautious and relativizing approach towards patristic teachings, Florovsky saw immutable values in the "ancient patristic tradition". Florovsky objects to the religious philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) and "his intellectual descendants and

1. S. Bulgakov, "Dogma and Dogmatic Theology" (1937), in: M. Plekon (ed.), *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time*, Rowan & Littlefield, Lanham, MA 2003, pp. 71-72.

those continuing his work, and from them into the present religio-philosophical tradition" (meaning Bulgakov in particular) to cast theology in the language and concepts of contemporary philosophy, especially German idealism. Instead, Florovsky posits the Greek-Byzantine patristic tradition as the only true philosophy and the only true theology. In Florovsky's conception, the task of theology consists –

not so much translating the tradition of faith into contemporary language –into the code of the most current philosophy, so to speak– as *learning to find the immutable basic principles of the Christian love of wisdom in the old patristic tradition*; not revising dogmatic theology in line with modern-day philosophy, but rather the reverse: *building up philosophy on the basis of the experience of faith itself, so that the experience of faith becomes the source and standard of philosophical contemplation*².

The temptation to absolutize tradition is particularly acute concerning the Fathers of the Church, especially the use of quotations from the Fathers as proof texts on the same level of authority as Scripture. In some of Florovsky's statements advocating the neopatristic synthesis, he seems in fact to equate the Fathers and Scripture. In a paper delivered in 1959 to the Faith and Order Orthodox Consultation in Kifissia, Greece, Florovsky stated:

The Fathers testify to the Apostolicity of the tradition. There are two stages in the proclamation of the Christian faith. *Our simple faith had to acquire composition*. There was an inner urge, an inner logic, an internal necessity, in this transition from *kerygma* to *dogma*. Indeed, the *dogmata* of the Fathers are essentially the same "simple" *kerygma*, which had been once delivered and deposited by the Apostles, once, forever [...]. "The mind of the Fathers" is an intrinsic term of reference in Orthodox theology, no less than the word of the Holy Writ, and indeed never separated from it³.

2. G. Florovsky, "Western Influences in Russian Theology" (1937), in: B. Gallaher and P. Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, T&T Clark, London 2019, pp. 147-148.

3. G. Florovsky, "The Ethos of the Orthodox Church" (1959), in: Gallaher and Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, *op.cit.*, p. 293.

In his critique of George Florovsky's 1937 masterly if highly opiniated study *The Ways of Russian Theology*⁴, Nicolas Berdyaev (1874-1948) accuses Florovsky of having yielded to "the temptation of historicism". Berdyaev sees Florovsky's historicism as the "absolutization" of history, specifically the history of Greek-Byzantine theology, as the norm for all Christian thought and indeed of Christianity itself⁵. Indeed, in a later work Florovsky quotes with approval Marc Bloch's statement that "Christianity is a religion of historians" and he goes on to say that "Christianity is basically a vigorous appeal to history"⁶. The question is not so much "history" as a concept or a narrative or an interpretation of events, as history as the source of Christian tradition, first and foremost the history of salvation as revealed in the Old Testament and especially the New Testament. Florovsky most likely understood Bloch's statement in the sense that "Christianity is a religion of tradition". Berdyaev and others perceive a danger in absolutizing tradition such that it becomes the sole acceptable theological criterion, and, in the absence of a notion of tradition as dynamic, as "living tradition", with the attendant risk of transforming "tradition" into "traditionalism". Traditionalism freezes religious thought and practices in exactly the same patterns as those already existing: the Spirit can no longer "blow where he pleases"⁷ but only where he has blown in the past.

For Bulgakov, the teachings of the Fathers reflect underlying verities, an eternal theology, which could be set into different philosophical systems, using language different from that of the Fathers. For Florovsky, it is not possible to articulate the truths of Christianity other than in the same concepts, the same philosophy, indeed the same vocabulary, as those of the Greek Fathers. Florovsky devoted a great of energy expounding

4. G. Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology* (1937), *The Collected Works of George Florovsky*, ed. R. Haugh, vol. 5, Belmont, MA – Nordland 1979; vol. 6, Büchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, LI 1987.

5. N. Berdyaev, "Orthodoxia i chelovechnost'" (Orthodoxy and Humanness), *Put'* 53, Paris (1937), pp. 53-65. Review of G. Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology*, YMCA-Press, Paris 1937. Transl. S. Janos <www.berdyaev.com/Berdyaev/berd_lib/1937_424.html> [13 May 2015].

6. G. Florovsky, "The Predicament of the Christian Historian" (1959), in: Gallaher and Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, *op.cit.*, p. 193.

7. See *Jn* 3, 1.

and defending his vision of the vital significance of patristic tradition in Orthodoxy and more specifically Greek-Byzantine theology as the essential norm for not only for Orthodox theology, but for all Christian theology.

In his discussion of the significance of the patristic tradition, Bulgakov introduces an important distinction among dogma, doctrine and *theologoumena* (although he tends at times to fuse the latter two): “The number of dogmas is limited and, in the case of many if not the majority of questions, we are presented only with theological doctrines. Popular opinions in any case are not dogmas but *theologoumena*.⁸ In this sense, doctrines include teachings of the Fathers which are not formal Church dogmas and it is here that ancient Fathers may have differing and even conflicting views. Consistent with his overall approach to the Fathers, Florovsky rejects the validity of Bulgakov’s distinction between dogma and doctrine, which he calls a “a forced distinction”.⁹ Florovsky’s main concern was to prevent the expression of Christian doctrine in any system of thought other than the Christianized Hellenism of the Greek Fathers and he appears to consider all patristic teachings as equally valid and significant.

Traditionalism in Orthodoxy

The tension between the two primal approaches to the patristic tradition has become more acute in recent decades with a forceful questioning of the soundness and pertinence of the neopatristic approach to Orthodox theology on the one hand, and the rise of Orthodox fundamentalism and “traditional Orthodoxy”¹⁰ on the other, with the attendant risk of falling into a rigid traditionalism. Already in 1937 Bulgakov characterized the tendency to “canonize” the *writings* of the Fathers as a “patrological

8. Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology”, op.cit., p. 67.

9. Florovsky, “Patristics and Modern Theology” (1936), in Gallaher and Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, op.cit., pp. 153-158.

10. On “traditional Orthodoxy”, see G. Demacopoulos, “‘Traditional Orthodoxy’ as a Postcolonial Movement”, *Journal of Religion* 97, 4 (2017), pp. 475-499.

heresy”¹¹. In a similar vein, later Orthodox theologians refer to the tendency towards patristic traditionalism as a “patristic fundamentalism” (Petros Vassiliadis), “patristicism” (Alan Brown), a “fundamentalism of tradition” or a “fundamentalism of the Fathers” (Pantelis Kalaitzidis)¹². Although the Church accords high value to patristic writings, the Church canonizes the *persons* of Fathers for their holiness; it does not canonize their *writings* as unerring texts. In some cases, it is necessary to set aside patristic teachings; as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (1934-2022) writes: “Patristic wheat needs to be distinguished from patristic chaff”¹³.

In a 1990 lecture at St Vladimir’s Theological Seminary, Petros Vassiliadis (b. 1945), while recognizing the impact of Florovsky’s call for Orthodox theology to go “back to the Fathers” on theology in Greece, nonetheless points to this tendency towards traditionalism:

This revival, despite Florovsky’s own remarks not to return to the dead letter of the Fathers, has seldom become nationwide a liberating force leading to a holistic understanding of all aspects of theology and everyday church life. Very often, “return to the Fathers” was understood in a fundamentalist way, similar to the biblical fundamentalism of the Protestant world. Some have regretted this kind of patristic fundamentalism that has replaced a biblical fundamentalism that flourished during the climax of the activities of the religious organizations in Greece¹⁴.

11. Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology”, op.cit., p. 71.

12. P. Vassiliadis, “Greek Theology in the Making, Trends and Facts in the 80s – Vision for the 90s”, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 35, 1 (1991), p. 34; A. Brown, “On the Criticism of *Being as Communion* in Anglophone Orthodox Theology,” in: D. Knight (ed.), *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*, Ashgate, Aldershot UK 2007, pp. 64, 76; P. Kalaitzidis, “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54, 1 (2010), p. 8.

13. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin, London 1993, p. 204.

14. Vassiliadis, “Greek Theology in the Making”, op.cit., p. 34. The reference to “religious organizations in Greece” is to religious brotherhoods, the most important of which was Zoe. The members of the brotherhoods were Orthodox, but the brotherhoods themselves operated outside the formal structures of the Greek Orthodox Church. They were powerful influences in Greek religious life from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1960s. See P. Ladouceur, “Greek Religious Movements”, in: *Modern Orthodox Theology: ‘Behold I Make All Things New’*, T&T Clark, London 2019, pp. 129-134.

Indeed, the fault line between contemporary critics and defenders of neopatristic theology is much the same as it was when Florovsky first advocated a neopatristic “turn” in Orthodox theology in the 1930s: What role and authority should Orthodox theology accord to the teachings of the Fathers on non-dogmatic questions?

Living Tradition

Neopatristic theologians attempt to build in some safeguards against traditionalism, notably in the distinction between *Tradition* and *traditions* and in the notion of *living tradition*¹⁵. There are two principal aspects of the attempt to distinguish “Tradition” from “traditions.” The first is the affirmation, long-standing in both the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches, of the importance of Tradition in Christianity, in contrast to the *sola scriptura* doctrine of the Reformation. In the Orthodox perspective, Scripture and Tradition are not alternatives, but rather essential and complementary aspects of the Church; indeed, Scripture itself is a part of Tradition, since it was created within the Church. But this external aspect of Tradition must be completed by an internal distinction between what is immutable in Tradition and what is transient and subject to change. In a 1952 essay Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) advanced the mystical notion of Tradition as “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of the Body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, of knowing the Truth in the Light which belongs to it”¹⁶. This approach conceives Tradition as “the unique mode of receiving Revelation, a faculty owed to the Holy Spirit”, “a faculty of judging in the Light of the Holy Spirit”¹⁷, rather than Revelation itself.

15. See the discussion in P. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2000, pp. 382-386.

16. Lossky’s essay “Tradition and Traditions” first appeared as the introductory chapter to L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (1952). Reprinted in V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1985, pp. 141-168; here at p. 152.

17. Lossky, “Tradition and Traditions,” op.cit., p. 155.

Church traditions, on the other hand, are customs, practices, and rituals, often relating to the sacramental, liturgical and ascetic life of the Church, and to the structure of the Church, all of which may evolve over time in response to the different circumstances in which the Church exercises her ministry. Lossky cites several examples mentioned by St. Basil the Great: the sign of the Cross, baptismal rites, blessing of oil, eucharistic epiclesis, the custom of turning towards the east during prayer and that of remaining standing on Sunday¹⁸. To these can be added more sensitive ones, such as liturgical languages and liturgical calendars.

Fr. John Meyendorff (1926-1992) expands on Lossky's understanding of Tradition, contrasting it with "human tradition":

No clear notion of the true meaning of Tradition can be reached without constantly keeping in mind the well-known condemnation of "human tradition" by the Lord himself [cf. Mt 15:3-9]. The one Holy Tradition, which constitutes the self-identity of the Church through the ages and is the organic and visible expression of the life of the Spirit in the Church, is not to be confused with the inevitable, often creative and positive, sometimes sinful, and always relative accumulation of human traditions in the historical Church¹⁹.

And Peter Bouteneff (b. 1960) spells this out even more clearly, identifying criteria for distinguishing dogma and teachings:

It is important, then, to distinguish among the teachings that are found within the life of the church. Not everything that is taught by someone in the church is dogmatically binding. Not everything that we read in one or another the Church Fathers' writings is a dogma. Nor is every rule described in Scripture dogmatic [...]. Teachings are dogmatic when they are shown to have been clearly defined –usually by an ecumenical council– and have been universally accepted by all the churches that recognize themselves as Orthodox²⁰.

18. Lossky, "Tradition and Traditions", *In the Image and Likeness of God*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1974, pp. 141-168, in p. 147, citing Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, PG 32, 188AB.

19. J. Meyendorff, "The Meaning of Tradition," in: *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1978, p. 21.

20. P. Bouteneff, *Sweeter than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, NY 2006, pp. 197-198.

Without a distinction between Tradition and traditions, there is indeed a danger of dogmatizing or “canonizing” almost everything in the Church, including all the writings of the Fathers, as Bulgakov pointed out, and all decisions of the ecumenical councils, whether truly dogmatic, disciplinary, or organizational (such as the liturgical calendar).

The expression “living tradition” seeks to convey the sense that tradition is not static, but evolves in response to new resources to meet changing situations and needs of the Church. The expression first came into prominence as the title of a collection of eleven essays published in 1937 by the Saint Sergius Theological Institute in Paris under the title *Living Tradition: Orthodoxy in the Modern World*²¹. Paul Valliere describes the book as “a summary of the theology of the Russian school”, asserting the divine-human nature of tradition²². The book contains essays by most of the teaching staff of the Saint Sergius Institute (but not Florovsky), notably Nicholas Afanasiev, Sergius Bulgakov, Anton Kartashev, Cyprian Kern, Georges Fedotov, Leon Zander, and Basil Zenkovsky²³. The title of the book showed that the leading exiled members of the religious renaissance considered that their theology was grounded in tradition, including the teachings of the Fathers – perhaps an implicit response to the emerging neopatristic theology, which could not pretend to have a monopoly on tradition²⁴. In 1978 John Meyendorff picked up the title of the 1937 book for a collection of his essays published as *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World*²⁵.

21. *Zhivoe predanie: pravoslavie v sovremennosti* (Living Tradition: Orthodoxy in the Modern World), YMCA Press, Paris 1937.

22. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, *op.cit.*, p. 384.

23. The essays by Afanasiev, Bulgakov, Kern, and Zander are translated in Michael Plekon (ed.), *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD 2003. Paul Valliere presents a summary of the main articles of *Zhivoe predanie* in *Modern Russian Theology*, pp. 387-395.

24. Paul Valliere characterizes the purpose of the book somewhat more narrowly, in negative terms: to oppose a theological proposition – “that patristic theology should be the primary guide of Orthodox theology and Orthodox life which, as the authors believed, sanctioned the attack on Bulgakov and threatened to diminish the freedom and scope of Orthodox theologizing”. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, *op.cit.*, p. 383.

25. Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, *op.cit.*

Another middle course between considering patristic teachings and concepts as absolute and universal, and a rejection of much of patristic theology as outdated and irrelevant, is a “contextual approach” to patristic theology, along the lines of Bulgakov’s historical perspective. Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev (b. 1966) summarizes what this means:

Phenomena can only receive adequate judgement from within the context of their origin and development. Thus the theology of each Church Father should be studied, as far as possible, from within the historical, theological, cultural and linguistic world in which he lived [...]. One should not apply criteria applicable in one context to a patristic author who belongs to a totally different milieu²⁶.

The contextual approach to patristic theology is closer to Bulgakov’s thinking than to Florovsky’s: “The writings of the Fathers,” wrote Bulgakov in 1937, “are historically conditioned and therefore limited in their meaning”²⁷. But not everything that the Fathers wrote should be seen only contextually or historically: on major dogmatic questions, especially concerning the Trinity and Christ, the teachings of the Fathers found their way into formal Christian dogmas. It is in this sense that the fluid notion of *consensus patrum* may have some value. But beyond a relatively small number of formal dogmas (such as the Trinity and the two natures of Christ), *consensus patrum* is problematic. For Florovsky, *consensus patrum* applied only to formal dogmas, and even then, he declared that he did not “like this phrase”²⁸. The difficulty is to respect the distinction between what is absolute because it relates to dogma and what is more properly contextual or personal, useful guidance for contemporary theology but far from definitive. The other danger in a strictly contextual approach to the Fathers is that of relegating patristic

26. H. Alfeyev, “The Patristic Heritage and Modernity,” in: *Orthodox Witness Today*, World Council of Churches 2006, Geneva, p. 156. Alfeyev goes on to castigate Florovsky’s *Ways of Russian Theology* as “neither adequate nor fair” for its critique of Russian patristics from a Byzantine perspective.

27. Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology”, op.cit., p. 71.

28. G. Florovsky, “On the Authority of the Fathers” (1963), letter to A. F. Dobbie Bateman (12 December 1963), in: Gallaher and Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, op.cit., p. 238.

writings to academic or literary museums, interesting, beautiful perhaps, but hardly relevant to everyday life.

Ironically, later in life, Florovsky seems to have moved closer to Bulgakov's thinking on the contemporary authority of the Fathers. In a letter written in December 1963 to his friend the Anglican Arthur Dobbie Bateman²⁹, Florovsky writes: "The 'authority' of the Fathers is not a *dictatus papae*. They are guides and witnesses, no more. Their *vision* is 'of authority', not necessarily their words"³⁰. Florovsky's main concern was the struggle against a mere "theology of repetition," which he always recognized as a danger in his neopatristic project. The statement that the Fathers are "guides and witnesses, no more", is more akin to Bulgakov, as expressed in his 1937 paper on "Dogma and Dogmatic Theology", than to Florovsky's own earlier more unqualified exaltation of patristic thought.

In the final analysis, Florovsky's own neopatristic synthesis is more a theological method or a framework for theology, which he called "acquiring the mind of the Fathers", doing theology as the Fathers did theology, than the content of patristic theology, as though all answers to modern problems could be found in the writings of the Fathers. Based on indications that Florovsky gave over the years, the following elements appear to enter into Florovsky's notion of what he calls the "patristic mind": Scripture as the foundation of all theology; Christ as the center of theological reflection; a historical awareness, both the history of salvation as revealed in Scripture and the history of the Church; a 'catholic consciousness', theology in the context of the Church; fidelity to the Hellenistic-Byzantine theological tradition; a focus on contemporary issues and problems; and the integration of theology with the prayer and sacramental life of the Church³¹.

29. Arthur F. Dobbie Bateman (1897-1974) was an early leader of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius and one of the first English scholars and translators of modern Russian philosophy, theology, and spirituality.

30. Florovsky, "On the Authority of the Fathers", *op.cit.*, p. 238.

31. On Florovsky's neopatristic project as a theological method or framework, see Gallaher and Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, *op.cit.*, p. 20; and Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology*, *op.cit.*, pp. 110-114.

Even before formulating his project of a “return to the Fathers”, Florovsky considered that the ancient Fathers showed how Christian philosophy and theology could respond to the challenges of their times, as he wrote in 1931 in the Preface to the publication of his lectures on fourth century theology at the Saint Sergius Institute:

Tradition is life, and the traditions are really being preserved only in their living reproduction and empathy [for them]. The Fathers give evidence concerning this in their own works. They show how the truths of the faith revive and transfigure the human spirit, how human thought is renewed and revitalized in the experience of faith. They develop the truths of the faith into the integral and creative Christian worldview. In this respect, the patristic works are for us the source of creative inspiration, an example of Christian courage and wisdom. This is a school of Christian thought, of Christian philosophy³².

The Development of Doctrine

The possibility of the development of doctrine derives from the role of tradition in contemporary theology. Orthodox are uncomfortable with the notion of doctrinal development because of a deeply ingrained conviction that Christ gave the full deposit of the faith once and for all in his life and in his teachings, as received by the apostles, recorded in the New Testament and transmitted in the Church. At the same time Orthodox vehemently oppose the idea that the utilization of concepts originating in Greek philosophy to describe the faith constituted a profound distortion of the faith of the apostles, a critique of early Christian theology most forcibly articulated by the German historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). But Orthodox have difficulty in articulating why early Christian theology, especially the Trinitarian theology and the Christology of the fourth and fifth centuries, and even the Palamite theology of the divine energies, does not constitute

32. G. Florovsky, “Preface”, *Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, YMCA Press, Paris 1931. Unfortunately, the Preface is not in the English translation of this book. Translation from B. Gallaher, “Georges Florovsky on Reading the Life of St Seraphim,” *Sobornost* 27, 1 (2005), n. 34, p. 68.

development of doctrine, as understood in Catholic and Protestant theologies, yet are valid and even necessary expressions of the Christian faith.

Andrew Louth (b. 1944) addresses this issue in a paper entitled “Is Development of Doctrine a Valid Category for Orthodox Theology?”. His answer is a clear “No”: “The idea of development itself is not an acceptable category in Orthodox theology”.³³ But this “No” requires qualification to avoid wandering accidentally into the von Harnack camp. Louth quotes with approval the Romanian theologian Mihail Neamțu: “The profound dogmatic elaborations of the fourth century [...] did not bring the apostolic faith somewhere further, on to a deeper level of understanding.” Yet Louth states on the following page: “The central theological task, as the Fathers see it, is to interpret the writings of the *theologoi*, that is, the Scriptures, in the light of the mystery of Christ [...]. There is no development beyond seeking, again and again, to deepen our understanding of the Scriptures in the light of the mystery of Christ”³⁴. There is some quibbling over the meaning of “development” and the distinction is subtle: Orthodox reject the notion of doctrinal development in the sense of the discovery of new doctrines, but accept that there is deepening in our understanding and articulation of the deposit of the faith as revealed by Jesus Christ. This safeguards the dogmatic expression of the faith in the Nicene Creed and other dogmatic statements (against the critiques of von Harnack *et al.*), and still permits Orthodox theology to deal with new issues, not present in apostolic or even patristic times, using notions borrowed notably from Greek philosophy or not fully developed in earlier times, such as the theology of the human person and social and political theology.

In this same paper Louth also advances the position that –

We do not hope to surpass the Fathers in our grasp of the mystery of Christ; rather, we look to them to help us to a deeper understanding. We do not stand

33. A. Louth, “Is Development of Doctrine a Valid Category for Orthodox Theology?”, in: V. Hotchkiss and P. Henry (eds.), *Orthodoxy and Western Culture, A Collection of Essays Honoring Jaroslav Pelikan on His Eightieth Birthday*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 2005, p. 61. See also similar statements on pp. 55 and 57.

34. Louth, “Development of Doctrine”, op.cit., pp. 60-61.

over against the Fathers; we come to them to learn from them. This entails that if development [of doctrine] means that there is an historical advance in Christian doctrine, making our understanding of the faith deeper or more profound than that of the Fathers, at least in principle, then such a notion of development cannot be accepted as a category of Orthodox theology. We shall not advance beyond the faith of the Fathers, nor shall we advance beyond the faith of the apostles³⁵.

Such statements could be interpreted as supporting von Harnack's position. Or, that conceptualizing definitions of the faith using philosophical terms and language such as *ousia*, *physis*, *hypostasis*, *energeia*, and *ex nihilo*, does not constitute a deeper understanding of the faith, even though such terms are not used in their philosophical sense in the New Testament concerning the Trinity, Christ, or how God relates to creation.

Another question in the discussion of tradition and especially patristic theology is: Who are the Fathers? The apostles? The Fathers up to the fourth century? Or fifth? Or the fourteenth? Or the more open-ended view of Kallistos Ware:

It is dangerous to look on “the Fathers” as a closed cycle of writings belonging wholly to the past, for might not our own age produce a new Basil or Athanasius? To say that there can be no more Fathers is to suggest that the Holy Spirit has deserted the church³⁶.

Hilarion Alfeyev quotes these last sentences of Kallistos Ware with approval and adds:

The confession of a “patristic faith” not only implies the study of patristic writings and the attempt to bring the legacy of the Fathers to life, but also the belief that our era is no less patristic than any other. The “golden age” inaugurated by Christ, the apostles and the early Fathers endures in works of the Church Fathers of our days, to last for as long as the Church of Christ will stand on this earth and for as long as the Holy Spirit will inspire it³⁷.

35. Louth, “Development of Doctrine”, op.cit., pp. 55.

36. Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, London 1993, p. 204.

37. H. Alfeyev, “The Neopatristic Heritage and Modernity” in: *Orthodox Witness Today*, op.cit., p. 148. Alfeyev’s theological openness in the quotation is to some extent somewhat

Georges Florovsky was also open, if cautious, on the possibility of latter-day Fathers of the Church: “The church is still fully authoritative as she has been in the ages past, since the Spirit of Truth quickens her now no less effectively as in the ancient times”; “There should be no restriction at all” in the time frame of the normative authority of the church³⁸. But in naming Fathers, he does not venture later than Mark of Ephesus (fifteenth century). Future generations may well recognize great theologians of modern times as ‘Fathers and Mothers of the Church’.

Post-Patristic Theology?

Great diversity characterized Orthodox theology, especially in Greece, in the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. This theological multi-polarity in Greece includes at least six important modes of theology: vestiges of academic theology, especially in the theological educational system; the neopatristic approach to theology carried forward from “the theology of the ‘60s”, embodied notably by John Zizioulas; the theological moralism of the still-active but less prominent religious brotherhoods; theological conservatism or neo-traditionalism among certain academics, hierarchs, and monastic figures; the “neo-Orthodoxy” of Christos Yannaras and others; and revisionist critiques of neopatristic theology emerging from engagement with modernity and associated with the unfortunate expression “post-patristic theology”.

The term “post-patristic theology”, which suggests the abandonment of patristic theology, owes its origin to a controversial conference held at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies on 3-6 July 2010, on the provocative theme “Patristic or ‘Post-Patristic’ Theology: Can Orthodox

blurred by his own *dogmatica*, *Orthodox Christianity, Vol. II, Doctrine and Teaching of the Orthodox Church*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers, NY 2012, which is virtually a summary of patristic theology. See our review of this book in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 58, 4 (2014), pp. 475-483.

38. G. Florovsky, “Saint Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers”, in: Gallaher and Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, *op.cit.* pp. 221-232.

Theology Be Contextual?”. The conference brought together mainly younger Orthodox theologians and showcased the revisionist stream of Orthodox theology, chaffing against the weaknesses of neopatristic theology, in particular its almost single-minded focus on Greek-Byzantine theology, to the exclusion of other centers of Christian theology, and its explicit or implicit anti-Westernism, and its difficulty dealing with contemporary issues not present in ancient patristic times³⁹.

The inflammatory and misleading expression “post-patristic theology” of the Volos Conference provided a ready-made target for Orthodox neotraditionalists. The Conference stimulated an equal and opposite reaction in the form of a symposium organized by Metropolitan Seraphim (Mentzelopoulos) of Piraeus (b. 1956) to denounce “post-patristic theology” in general and the Volos Conference in particular. The symposium, held in Piraeus on 15 February 2012, brought together leading Greek neotraditionalist hierarchs and theologians, notably Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos (b. 1945), Demitrios Tselengidis and Fr. Theodoros Zisis (University of Thessaloniki) (b. 1941), and Fr. Georgios Metallinos (University of Athens) (b. 1940)⁴⁰. The main target of the 2012 symposium was the idea of “post-patristic theology,” but neopatristic theology suffered collateral damage. The scholarship was weak but the rhetoric strong. Speakers saw most Orthodox theology from the Slavophiles to neopatristic theology, and Orthodox involvement in ecumenism, as a vast modernist conspiracy against true Orthodoxy. The speakers were very critical of most modern Orthodox theology, including such major themes of neopatristic theology as the theology of the human person and eucharistic ecclesiology, seen as principal elements of “post-patristic theology”. But the speakers failed to come up with a viable alternative to neopatristic theology, only

39. The conference proceedings are published in Greek but not yet (2023) in English: P. Kalaitzidis and N. Asproulis (eds.), *Νεοπατερική σύνθεση ή μεταπατερική θεολογία; Τὸ αἴτημα τῆς θεολογίας τῆς συνάρτειας* (Neopatristic Synthesis or Postpatristic Theology? Can Orthodox Theology Be Contextual?), transl. N. Asproulis, Ekdotiki Demetriadou, Volos, GR 2018.

40. For English translations of the principal papers, see “Patristic Theology and Post-Patristic Heresy: Symposium of the Holy Metropolis of Piraeus”, Piraeus GR (15 February 2012); <<https://fr.scribd.com/document/305700579/Patristic-Theology>> [14 Dec 2023].

reiterating the pre-eminence of patristic theology, what Florovsky would no doubt call a “theology of repetition” of the Fathers⁴¹.

Conclusion

A subsidiary aspect of the debate over tradition is found in the “slogans” meant to typify one or another approach to the Fathers: “Back to the Fathers”, “Beyond the Fathers”, or “Post-Patristic”. “Back to the Fathers”, said to characterize neopatristic theology, sees the Fathers as normative expressions of Orthodox theology, whereas “Beyond the Fathers”, more associated with the Russian religious renaissance, considers the Fathers as a starting point for the further development of Christian thought in relation to contemporary problems and needs (and not an outright rejection of the Fathers). Paul Valliere critiques neopatristic theology as a “Back to the Fathers” movement bent on immobility, but he overstates his case by down-playing or ignoring altogether the dynamic element in Georges Florovsky’s project and especially Florovsky’s constant warning about the dangers of “a theology of repetition”⁴². Few Orthodox would subscribe to the idea of “Post-Patristic” theology, if it is seen as a complete disregard for patristic theology.

But any debate over such slogans is a dangerous and needless distraction from the underlying issues. Like other slogans, they oversimplify and misrepresent the nature of tradition and the complex foundations of the major approaches to the Fathers in modern Orthodox theology. A synthesis of the slogans is suggested by the expression “Forward with the Fathers”, used by Augustine Casiday as a chapter title of his book on the patristic heritage⁴³. “Forward with the Fathers” is certainly closer

41. For a more detailed analysis of the Piraeus Symposium, see Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology*, *op.cit.*, pp. 433-434.

42. See P. Valliere, “The Limits of Tradition”, *op.cit.*, conclusion to *Modern Russian Theology*, especially pp. 376-383. See also the critique of Valliere’s position in A. Casiday, *Remember the Days of Old: Orthodox Thinking on the Patristic Heritage*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers NY 2014, pp. 42-61.

43. Casiday, *Remember the Days of Old*, *op.cit.*, p. 141. Florovsky does not appear to have

to Florovsky's thinking than "Back to the Fathers", and, like "Living Tradition", maintains a dynamic approach to patristic theology, opening the door to the possibility of new insights, faithful to the patristic way of doing theology, rather than merely repeating what the Fathers wrote.

We now have a much better appreciation of the Fathers since the end of classical patristic age. This is fine and commendable: the problem is that a great deal of Orthodox "theological energy", which must be considered a scarce and shrinking resource, is devoted to patristic studies, which largely remain in a closed circuit, disconnected from contemporary theological issues and problems. Certainly, it is easier to study the thinking of one Father or one issue across several Fathers, than to tackle complex modern issues which were not a concern in patristic times. Florovsky himself produced many scholarly patristic studies, but patristic studies as such were not what he intended when he spoke about the need "to acquire the mind of the Fathers", a "patristic mindset". Even though Florovsky himself rarely ventured into uncharted waters, major exceptions being ecclesiology and ecumenical theology, his basic platform for the neopatristic synthesis clearly called for tackling contemporary issues using a patristic base.

In conclusion, whether patristic thought on any particular issue is considered normative or indicative, it is inconceivable that credible Orthodox theology today can be done without an acute awareness of the thinking of the Fathers. The starting point of Orthodox theology is Tradition, the twin pillars of Scripture and the Fathers – even if who actually are the "Fathers" remains an open question. Modern Orthodox theologians seek to map out a middle way in approaching Tradition, between "patristic fundamentalism" (the uncritical application of patristic writings as normative and resolving all modern issues), and the

used the expression "Forward with the Fathers" attributed to him, although he did write something similar in "Breaks and Links," the conclusion to *The Ways of Russian Theology* (1937): "The road 'to the Fathers' in any case leads only forward, never back. The point is to be true to the patristic *spirit*, rather than to the *letter* alone, to light one's inspiration at the patristic flame rather than engaging in a collection and classification of ancient texts". Gallaher and Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky*, *op.cit.*, p. 166.

rejection of patristic writings as irrelevant to modern problems. In this perspective, a balanced consideration of patristic theology as indicative but not determinative is most apt to serve the interests of furthering Christ's work in the present age.

The emphasis on patristic studies has distracted attention and resources from the study of contemporary issues which were not a concern or simply did not exist in classical patristic times. Even leading Orthodox figures typically associated with the modern revival of patristic theology expressed doubts concerning the actual practice of theology among patristically-inclined Orthodox. Fr. Alexander Schmemann, in a revealing reflection stimulated by a remark of Fr. John Meyendorff, expresses the limits of the neopatristic revival, not so much as it was originally conceived by Georges Florovsky, but rather as it was practiced by others:

Once, Father John M[eyendorff] told me in a moment of candor that he cannot understand why people are obsessed with the Fathers. So many people propagate this fashion, which prevents them from understanding anything in the real world, and at the same time are convinced that they serve the Church and Orthodoxy. I'm afraid that people are attracted not by the thoughts of the Fathers, not by the content of their writings, but by their style. It is quite close to the Orthodox understanding of liturgical services: love them without understanding; and inasmuch as they are not understood, come to no conclusion. We sit in our shell, charmed by a melody, and do not notice that the Church is suffering, and for a long time already has left the battlefield⁴⁴.

44. A. Schmemann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann, 1973-1983*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 2000, p. 269 (entry for 2 October 1980).