

# Scripture/Tradition – Method – Freedom

## *Orthodox Theology Challenged by Hermeneutics*

By Assaad Elias Kattan\*

Let me start by defining my frame of reference. My starting point in the following considerations are two hermeneutical ‘projects’, both not extensively paid heed to by scholars, and both prior to the so-called neo-patristic paradigm shift in Orthodox theology. The first one is Vasilios Antoniadis’s (1851-1932)<sup>1</sup> textbook on hermeneutics published in Constantinople in 1921. The second one is represented by Sergius Bulgakov’s (1871-1944)<sup>2</sup> valuable insights about the hermeneutical query found in his book *The Orthodox Church*, written in Russian apparently by the beginning of the 1930s and published in English as early as 1935. As used here, the term ‘project’ should be treated with caution since we are dealing with two unequal entities at least

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1. Antoniadis is mentioned by Th. G. Stylianopoulos as one of the leading figures of Greek biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century; see Th. G. Stylianopoulos, “Biblical Studies in Orthodox Theology: A Response”, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17 (1972), pp. 69-85, esp. 70.

2. See on Bulgakov, for example, P. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharav, Soloviev, Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2000; Ant. Arjakovsky, *Essai sur le père Serge Bulgakov (1871-1944) philosophe et théologien chrétien*, Parole et Silence, Paris 2006; An. Louth, “Fr Sergii Bulgakov and the nature of theology”, in: *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove 2015, pp. 42-59; Kateřina Bauerová, “The Mysticism of Pan-Unity: Sophiology Revisited”, in: Ivana Noble, Kateřina Bauerová, T. Noble, P. Parushev, *Wrestling with the Mind of the Fathers*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York 2015, pp. 157-197; R. F. Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York 2017; P. Ladouceur, *Modern Orthodox Theology: Behold, I Make All Things New*, T & T Clark, London 2019, pp. 59-94 and 193-229.

in terms of size. Whereas Antoniadis's textbook consists of some 150 pages written in heavy *kathareuosa* (Greek καθαρεύουσα) Bulgakov's remarks on hermeneutics, far from elaborate, are primarily found within the broader framework of two chapters in his book respectively entitled *The Church as Tradition* and *The Hierarchy*. Antoniadis's book has never been translated and seems to have passed almost unnoticed as yet<sup>3</sup>. This is certainly not the case for Bulgakov's *The Orthodox Church*, which has remained for decades his best-known theological work. However, Bulgakov's hermeneutical insights cannot be said to have attracted a lot of interest either. In that sense, there is something common between the two theologians I am dealing with.

### Vasilios Antoniadis on Hermeneutics

Vasilios Antoniadis joined the theological school of Halki in 1890 where he became professor of theology and philosophy<sup>4</sup>. His book on biblical hermeneutics carries the title *Encheiridion*: a textbook addressed mainly to theology students and meant to fill a gap in the teaching material, a gap lamented by Antoniadis himself in his prologue<sup>5</sup>. Antoniadis's book consists of three parts. After a long introduction, the author elaborates first on the types of biblical sense; he tackles second the question of how to find them out, and addresses third the various ways of communicating them. In this paper, I am mainly concerned with the introduction and the first two parts.

Antoniadis's introduction is very much about the history of hermeneutics. In this respect, he describes the methodological difference between Alexandria and Antioch respectively in terms of synthesis and analysis. This explains Antioch's penchant to literal and historical interpretation. While Antoniadis sees on both sides the possibility to

3. See, however, S. Agourides, *Hermēneutikē tōn Hieron Keimenōn: Problēmata – Methodoi Ergasias stēn Hermēneia tōn Graphōn*, Artos Zōēs, Athens 3<sup>2002</sup>, p. 28.

4. See V. Antoniadis, *Encheiridion Hiera Hermēneutikēs*, P. Angelidou, Constantinople 1921, prologue (without page numbers).

5. See *ibid.*

drift into extremist attitudes, he does not hide his preference for the school of Antioch, especially in the person of St John Chrysostom († 407), who is regarded to have fully respected human energy and located the inspiration in the meaning rather than in the mere words. Although Chrysostom recognized the existence of allegories, types, and symbols in the Old Testament, he rejected the arbitrary search for “mystical” and “hidden” meanings everywhere<sup>6</sup>. Whereas the general tendency in the West throughout the Middle Ages was to cherish the allegorical interpretation of scripture, the Byzantines were more inclined to a literal approach<sup>7</sup>.

Antoniadis provides, to a large extent, a balanced and sources-oriented sketch of Protestant biblical hermeneutics<sup>8</sup>. He proves fully aware of the vast plurality of Protestant hermeneutical positions – something largely at odds with some reductionist Orthodox readings of Protestantism we may come across even today. For him, the Reformation inaugurates a brand-new era in terms of hermeneutics, marked not only by the dismissal of church tradition, but also by laying the emphasis on the literal sense<sup>9</sup>. However, the Protestant rejection of church tradition does not amount to interpreting scripture without any criterion. Protestants, Antoniadis rightly notes, would also appeal to the rule of faith so as to guarantee the correctness of interpretation, self-evidently to their own confessions of faith, which they consider to derive from scripture itself<sup>10</sup>. Though some excessive Protestant tendencies have obliterated any sense of certainty with respect to the scriptural meaning, Protestantism has largely contributed to advancing the philological interpretation of the Bible<sup>11</sup>. The most distinctive feature of Protestantism in the 18th and 19th centuries is the claim to total freedom from any dogmatic premise<sup>12</sup>. A similar hermeneutical plurality is registered by Antoniadis in the Catholic church despite the consensus existing there about the

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6. See *ibid.*, pp. 23-25.

7. See *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

8. See *ibid.*, pp. 33-37.

9. See *ibid.*, p. 33.

10. See *ibid.*, p. 34.

11. See *ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

12. See *ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

rejection of the Protestant *sola scriptura*<sup>13</sup>. Generally speaking, Antoniadis sees the Catholics torn between their willingness, on one hand, to refute Protestantism by stressing that scripture ought to be construed in harmony with the fathers and the canon of church tradition, and their mimetic tendency, on the other, to be as liberal as the Protestants themselves, especially because of the “modernist”<sup>14</sup> spirit which pervades the Catholic church<sup>15</sup>.

How do the Orthodox approach hermeneutics? Unlike the times of the early church, Orthodox scholars today are more reluctant to tackle hermeneutical queries<sup>16</sup>. Be that as it may. No Orthodox theologian has ever thrown into question the ancient principle that scriptural interpretation must agree with the rule of faith and the consensus of the fathers. A currently pending question is whether divine inspiration also covers purely historical details in such a way as to preclude any human weakness or inaccuracy. A number of Orthodox theologians would answer this question by endorsing the analytical approach of the school of Antioch, thus acknowledging the existence of historical, chronological, and geographical inaccuracies in the Bible and seeking to explain them without feeling impelled to question the general principle of inspiration<sup>17</sup>.

In the first part of his book, Antoniadis avers that a biblical text has one literal sense<sup>18</sup>. This does not imply that there is no possibility for a text to allow more than one understanding<sup>19</sup>, but the sense intended by the author cannot be but one<sup>20</sup>. The oneness of the literal sense is by no means diminished by the manifold ways of allegorizing or applying a text to different situations<sup>21</sup>. The one literal sense is decisive when it

13. See *ibid.*, p. 41.

14. See *ibid.*, p. 44.

15. See *ibid.*, pp. 41-44.

16. See *ibid.*, p. 45.

17. See *ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

18. See *ibid.*, p. 68.

19. Antoniadis (see *ibid.*) gives examples such as *Joh* 2, 19-22 and 11, 12-14

20. See Antoniadis, *Encheiridion*, *op.cit.*, p. 69 (footnote 4).

21. See *ibid.*, p. 69.

comes to extract from scripture the dogmas of faith and the principles of Christian ethics<sup>22</sup>.

The typological sense, whose legitimacy is nowhere thrown into question, is characterized by its oneness too<sup>23</sup>. A person, a thing, or an event in the Old Testament cannot function as a type of many persons, things, or events in the New Testament. Melchisedec, for instance, is the type of Christ and can stand in no typological relationship to any other person in the New Testament. Nevertheless, this general rule has one exception: a type may symbolize two things inasmuch as they logically relate to each other as genus and species. Thus, the light to the nations in *Isa* 49, 6 refers to both Jesus<sup>24</sup> and his disciples<sup>25</sup> because they belong to him and carry on his preaching activity<sup>26</sup>.

How to define the authority and limits of typology? The legitimacy of the typological sense stems from the indelible fact that both Jesus himself and his disciples employed typological readings of the Old Testament. Typology constitutes a logical consequence of the close relationship between the two Testaments<sup>27</sup>. However, the type has less value than the literal sense, for the latter, since it evinces more clarity, is superior when it comes to demonstrations<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, typology is limited to the Old Testament. If the New Testament represents the full revelation, there is no more room for types in it<sup>29</sup>. More restrictedly still, Antoniadis affirms that not everything in the Old Testament can be viewed as a type<sup>30</sup>. What are the criteria for a person, a thing, or an event to acquire the rank of a type? It must be directly testified for by the Lord himself, the apostles, and the official opinion of the church, or has to be indirectly deduced by logics. Should a typological interpretation lack these criteria, it possesses no demonstrative authority even if claimed by a church father, a church

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22. See *ibid.*, p. 70.

23. See *ibid.*, p. 70.

24. *Mtt* 4, 16.

25. *Acts* 13, 47.

26. See *ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

27. See *ibid.*, p. 73.

28. See *ibid.*, p. 73.

29. See *ibid.*, p. 74.

30. See *ibid.*, p. 74.

author, or a hymnographer. It may however be useful for teaching and edifying the faithful. For instance, the typological construal of the red sea in some liturgical hymns as referring to the virginity of the Theotokos is of no authority for it collides with the testimony of *1 Cor 10, 2* where the red sea is viewed as a baptismal symbol<sup>31</sup>.

In the second part of his book, Antoniadis raises the question of how to find the right meaning of a biblical passage. His hermeneutical model is Christological: there exists an analogy between scripture, having both a divine and a human character, and the person of the savior who is simultaneously God and man. Just as in the person of Christ the characteristics of both natures are fully preserved, biblical interpretation likewise ought to do justice to both scriptural dimensions and manifest them in a balanced way. The human element must be explored according to the human rules of grammar, logics, and rhetoric, whereas the divine element should be determined in harmony with scripture as a whole and church tradition. Antoniadis seeks first to explain how to deal with the biblical text as a philological and grammatical product by appealing to the rules of literal and historical interpretation; second, he tries to pinpoint the divine content by referring to the canon of faith, love, and hope, which pervades the whole scripture, and the unanimous and steadfast tradition of the church. While the first type of interpretation is described as philological or grammatical, the second type is called theological or harmonic<sup>32</sup>.

An adequate philological interpretation of scripture entails a satisfactory knowledge of the meaning of the words<sup>33</sup> as well as a thorough examination of the context. Antoniadis stresses the great benefit which the Orthodox exegete may draw from sciences like archeology, history, geography, and chronology. He unhesitatingly recommends the knowledge provided by recent archeological excavations or the historical works written by Protestants, Catholics, or scholars from outside<sup>34</sup>.

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31. See *ibid.*, p. 75.

32. See *ibid.*, p. 78.

33. See *ibid.*, pp. 79-89.

34. See *ibid.*, pp. 94-97.

While philological interpretation strives after understanding a biblical passage in itself, harmonic interpretation seeks to put it in relation with the author's teaching, with scripture as a whole, and with the tradition of the ecumenical church<sup>35</sup>. The principle of coherence within scripture itself and between scripture and tradition, Antoniadis states, constitutes the major feature which distinguishes Orthodox from "heterodox" biblical interpretation<sup>36</sup>. Nonetheless, the hermeneutical principle of harmonization does not apply to all the divergences found in scripture, but only to those related to the essential truths of faith, love, and hope. The divine authors may disagree in terms of history, chronology, geography, and archeology. However, they absolutely agree when it comes to the dogmas of faith<sup>37</sup>. The historical parts of the Bible, albeit written under the guidance of God's foresight and grace, are not free from inaccuracies owing to human energy<sup>38</sup>. Discrepancies may also exist between the Bible and archeological discoveries<sup>39</sup>. A decision in favor of historical science to the detriment of the biblical narrative is possible, even necessary, if there are cogent arguments, yet it should not be programmed beforehand<sup>40</sup>.

Finally, Antoniadis grapples with the question of how the interpreter ought to relate to church tradition and to the fathers<sup>41</sup>. The exegete has the obligation to respect the official opinion of the church. One of the key criteria for determining the official character of an interpretation is that it should be solemnly advanced by an ecumenical council or by a local synod ratified by a general council<sup>42</sup>. Thus, the 5th Ecumenical Council, in rejecting Theodore of Mopsuestia's († 429) claim that the Holy Spirit breathed by Jesus on the disciples was merely a type, or a symbol, of the Pentecost, proffers an authoritative understanding of

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35. See *ibid.*, p. 98.

36. See *ibid.*, p. 99.

37. See *ibid.*, p. 102.

38. See *ibid.*, p. 104.

39. See *ibid.*, pp. 108-110.

40. See *ibid.*, p. 110.

41. See *ibid.*, pp. 110-113.

42. See *ibid.*, p. 110.

*Joh* 20, 22<sup>43</sup>. The second criterion Antoniadis envisages is consensus. An authoritative interpretation, though not formally pronounced by a council, can be however no less binding in virtue of its factual validation by the consensus of the church. For example, the interpreter is not allowed to construe *Jas* 5, 13-15 other than in terms of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, for this is the interpretation attested by the church consensus<sup>44</sup>. Notwithstanding, the exegete is not compelled to embrace any interpretation proposed by the councils, even the ecumenical ones. Here, again, the character of solemnity, as it were, takes over. For the documents issued by the councils contain several interpretations formulated in a secondary or accessory way or as applications of biblical passages to very concrete situations. Such interpretations are not compulsory and have no influence on the interpreter's freedom. A comparable logic is applicable to the fathers<sup>45</sup>. Albeit binding, the principle of consensus does not cover the wide range of patristic interpretations formulated out of an application concern, especially in ethical homilies, nor does it prejudice the exegete's freedom, which is a precious gift. In return, the interpreter should not abuse this freedom, but use it humbly to serve both science in general and the church he belongs to in particular<sup>46</sup>.

### Sergius Bulgakov's Hermeneutical Insights

It would be so fascinating a trip to examine the way in which Bulgakov interprets biblical passages, for example in his two books about the Theotokos<sup>47</sup> and John the Baptist<sup>48</sup>, and to bring to light the implicit hermeneutical principles that govern and organize his exegetical

43. See *ibid.*, p. 111.

44. See *ibid.*

45. See *ibid.*, p. 112.

46. See *ibid.*, p. 113.

47. See S. Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, transl. Thomas Allen Smith. W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI 2009.

48. See S. Bulgakov, *The Friend of the Bridegroom: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Forerunner*, transl. Boris Jakim, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI 2003.

outlook. Yet my task, in this paper, is merely to analyze his explicit hermeneutical considerations as found in his book on the Orthodox church. As Thomas Hopko perceptively observes, Bulgakov's book may be described as an introduction to Orthodoxy written mainly for Western Christians<sup>49</sup>. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Bulgakov repeatedly emphasizes what he believes to be the major differences between the Orthodox hermeneutical approach, on one hand, and Protestant and Catholic hermeneutics, on the other.

In this vein, Bulgakov asserts that there cannot be, and there should not be, any break whatsoever between scripture and tradition<sup>50</sup>. This being said, he seeks to do justice to the creative tension between the Bible and church tradition by positing that scripture is a canonized corpus and is therefore “above all other sources of faith, especially of all tradition in all its forms”<sup>51</sup> while tradition is a dynamic, creative, and open process that never stops and which consequently encompasses not only the past, but also the present<sup>52</sup>. Though intimately interconnected, holy scripture and tradition are not of equal value:

The criterion of the truth of Scripture is not tradition (although tradition testifies to Scripture), but on the contrary, tradition is recognized when founded on Scripture. Tradition cannot be in disagreement with Scripture [...]; it is an interpretation of Scripture<sup>53</sup>.

It goes without saying that this raises the question of how to interpret. Unlike Antoniadis's lengthy methodological considerations, Bulgakov limits himself to affirming that any method which helps better understand the biblical text in its historical form is welcome<sup>54</sup>. In fact, a variety of

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49. See Th. Hopko, “Foreward”, in: S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 1988, pp. VII-XVI, IX.

50. See Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

52. See *ibid.*, pp. 14 and 18: “Orthodoxy has a universal scale; it cannot be measured by one epoch only, which would give it an exclusive and particular imprint. It includes and unites everything truly creative, for the hidden promptings of real creativeness and of real knowledge proceed only from the Spirit of God Who lives in the Church”.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

54. See *ibid.*, pp. 15-16: “The Church does not object to the study of the Word of God

exegetical methods was obviously at work in the formation of church tradition in the past<sup>55</sup>. Today, the whole domain of biblical scholarship, which includes isagogic, critical, and hermeneutical considerations, is the domain of an inexhaustible living tradition which is being un-interrupted created<sup>56</sup>. The scientific study of the Bible, though not identical with its purely religious understanding<sup>57</sup>, necessarily feeds into what Bulgakov calls the religious interpretation of the word of God<sup>58</sup>. Although Bulgakov is keen to stress the difference between the realm of theology and that of science, he concedes that science has a bearing on theology inasmuch as it affects the way in which we understand the word of God:

Scientific study [...] cannot pretend to interpret Scripture from the point of view of dogma [...]. Still this scientific study does partake, in a certain degree, of dogmatic exegesis. In reality, knowledge of the sacred text, under all its possible aspects, has necessarily a certain value for religious interpretation. Consequently [sic] scientific study itself, scientific tradition, now begins to form a part of the general Church tradition regarding the interpretation of Scripture [...]. Thanks to contemporary scientific study the sacred text may be seen anew; what may be called the scientific tradition is normal and inevitable. This tradition, by the

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by all means possible, particularly by the method of scientific contemporary criticism".

55. See *ibid.*, p. 25: "The differences of exegesis and of method in ecclesiastical writers are too well known to be overlooked". See also *ibid.*, p. 84: "The ancient Church knew various schools of theology, and many very different theological individualities. It may be said that in the spiritual life this variety is most useful when it is greatest".

56. See *ibid.*, p. 15: "In a word, the whole domain of Old and New Testament science –isagogic, critical, hermeneutic– which has received scientific study so fruitful and in many respects so unexpected: this domain is still far from being completely explored, it is still nothing but a domain of open questions, it is the domain of living tradition which is being created".

57. See *ibid.*, p. 22: "When Scripture is read outside the service, it is necessary, from the very first, to discriminate between the scientific point of view and the religious. It is not that these points of view mutually exclude or oppose each other, but that each of them makes its special emphasis".

58. See *ibid.*, p. 18: "The scientific study of Scripture, as a work of literature, differs not at all from other categories of scientific study. The same methods are used. The results of scientific study are inevitably and naturally applied to the religious interpretation of the content of the Word of God in so far as they help to attain a more exact understanding of its historic form".

way dates from the most ancient times, beginning with the interpreters of the “Septuagint,” the Great Synagogue and the Holy Fathers<sup>59</sup>.

To refer to the huge potential of scholarship in shedding light on scripture leads inevitably to the question as to the limits of scientific research, i.e. the thorny issue of freedom. Bulgakov never tires of repeating that in the realm of theology scientific study should be free: “science enslaved is not science and is worth nothing”<sup>60</sup>. Hence, he harshly criticizes the attempts of the Catholic church to control biblical research by means of a special biblical commission<sup>61</sup>. However, as long as one is determined not to forsake the realm of a *church* theology<sup>62</sup>, freedom cannot be absolute, for it must abide by the major tenets of Orthodox faith:

Orthodoxy affords liberty for scientific study, provided the fundamental dogmas of the Church and the ecclesiastical definitions are safeguarded; it would be inadmissible, for scientific reasons, to change the canon of the holy books, to abrogate or to add to it. If the divinity of our Lord is not accepted, His miracles, His resurrection, the Holy Trinity – scientific study becomes tainted by an interior imperfection; it becomes blind and opinionated concerning all the Scriptures where these points are touched upon<sup>63</sup>.

For Bulgakov, there is a minimum of tradition obligatory and binding for all. It mainly consists of the Nicene creed and the dogmatic definitions of the seven ecumenical and some local councils<sup>64</sup>. Whereas the canons of

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59. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 16; see also *ibid.*, pp. 25 and 54: “To be sincere one must be free; freedom does not mean ‘free thought’ but freedom of thought; it is neither simple ignorance of traditional ecclesiastical doctrine nor license”.

61. See *ibid.*, p. 16.

62. See *ibid.*, p. 27: “Anyone who does not accept this minimum of Church tradition by that fact separates himself from the society of the Church”.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

64. See *ibid.*, pp. 27 and 100: “The Orthodox Church has only a small number of dogmatic definitions, forming the profession of faith obligatory for all its members. Strictly speaking, this minimum consists of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is read during the baptismal service and the liturgy, and the definitions of the seven ecumenical councils. This does not mean that these documents exhaust all the doctrine of the Church; but the rest has not been so formulated as to become obligatory dogma for all.” See also: S.

these councils are in a way obligatory too, they are inferior to the dogmatic definitions in terms of value and importance. Some of them have been even abrogated or has no validity anymore<sup>65</sup>. Although Bulgakov speaks of obligatory dogmatic definitions<sup>66</sup>, he seems to rather lay the emphasis on a binding content. It is Christ himself and the Spirit of God living in the church who remain unchanged<sup>67</sup>. Admittedly, the Greek terminology which has aptly served to forge the dogmatic definitions displays a great amount of appropriateness. It remains, however, context-bound and subject to the dynamics of dogmatic development Bulgakov ardently advocates: “The content of dogma is without fault and, so to speak, absolute. But though content is absolute, form is not”<sup>68</sup>.

It is worth noting that Bulgakov does not confine himself to general principles, but also tries to describe, in more concrete terms, how this interplay between the authoritative essentials of tradition and scholarly freedom functions. In what he calls “obvious cases”, the exegete should agree “with the fundamental conceptions of the Church”<sup>69</sup>. In “less obvious cases”, there exists room for examination, comparison, verification, and possible agreement with “what predominates in Church Tradition”<sup>70</sup>. At any rate, the exegete must connect his own opinion with what Bulgakov calls the “testimony of tradition” and “try to place his opinion in the context of interpretation given by the Church”<sup>71</sup>. Nevertheless, Bulgakov knows but too well that tradition resembles a tapestry with many colors and pictorial elements and includes “opinions of great authority and of

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Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology”, in: M. Plekon (ed.), *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time / Readings from the Eastern Church*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham 2003, pp. 67-82, esp. p. 67.

65. See Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, *op.cit.*, pp. 27-28.

66. See *ibid.*, p. 83: “It can even be said that definitions can never exhaust doctrine, because dogmas have a discursive, rational character, while the truth of the Church forms an indissoluble whole. This does not mean that the truth cannot be expressed by concepts; on the contrary, the fullness of truth opens to us an inexhaustible theological source”.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

different shades of meaning, sometimes even contradictory”<sup>72</sup>. Hence, fidelity to tradition is far from a slavish subservience. It is rather the kind of fidelity to a spiritual guide which neither impedes liberty nor stifles personal creativity<sup>73</sup>. Without disparaging the uniqueness of the patristic period, Bulgakov invites Orthodox theology to venture into new paths so as to meet the challenge of the new questions posed by modernity<sup>74</sup>. In sum, Bulgakov underscores, against Protestantism, the intrinsic relationship between scripture and tradition and, against the “Roman confession”, the freedom Orthodoxy gives to personal theological reflection, including exegesis<sup>75</sup>. This freedom is the “very life of theological thought”<sup>76</sup>.

## Conclusion

Both Antoniadis and Bulgakov, each in his own way, raise three key issues of Orthodox hermeneutical reflection. Even after the rise of the neo-patristic paradigm in Orthodox theology, or perhaps because of this

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72. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25; see also Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology”, *op.cit.*, pp. 70-71 (footnote 62).

73. See *ibid.*, p. 71: “The writings of the Holy Fathers must have a guiding authority, yet be applied with discernment. Therefore, firstly, for all of their authoritative character, the writings of the Holy Fathers need to be treated as a criterion of historical relativity, one that has unavoidable limitations [...]. This limitation of the Fathers’ writings is much more greatly felt, of course, when it comes to their scriptural exegesis, which was utterly bereft of the modern hermeneutics of textual and historical scholarship”.

74. See Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, *op.cit.*, pp. 84-85: “It should be said of Orthodox theological thought that it is far from having been exhausted in the classic times of the patristic period or later on in Byzantium: a glorious future opens before it. Orthodoxy is only now beginning to express itself in contemporary language and for the contemporary conscience. All this by no means lessens the unique value of the patristic period. But sincere theology must be modern, that is, it must correspond with its epoch. Our epoch has seen colossal revolutions in all the domains of thought, of knowledge, and of action. These revolutions wait a response on the part of Orthodox theology. Our time cannot be satisfied with an archaic or medieval scholastic theology”.

75. See *ibid.*, p. 83.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

rise, these issues have lost nothing of their timeliness and ought to be revisited in all their acuteness.

1. The first one concerns the relationship between scripture and tradition. Antoniadis's and Bulgakov's emphasis on their indissoluble interconnectedness is incontestably conditioned by the Protestant *sola scriptura* principle. Both Orthodox scholars pay little attention to the fact that this principle cannot be isolated from the centrality of Christ in Protestant soteriology, expressed by other terms such as *solus Christus* and *sola gratia*. In this, they are in alignment with a lot of subsequent Orthodox theologians. Be that as it may. What really matters for my present analysis is how Antoniadis and Bulgakov articulate the intimate link between scripture and tradition in terms of hermeneutics. For Bulgakov, there can be no break between them. Antoniadis goes so far as to assert that the distinctive feature of Orthodox hermeneutics is the principle of coherence within scripture itself, on one hand, and between scripture and tradition on the other. The organic unity of Bible and tradition seems to be a classical Orthodox *topos* and can be found in G. Florovsky<sup>77</sup>, N. Nissiotis<sup>78</sup>, S. Agourides<sup>79</sup>, and others. Even Orthodox theologians who are in favor of viewing scripture and tradition as two different sources usually stress how closely interrelated they are<sup>80</sup>. This interrelatedness, however, does not solve the problem Bulgakov appears

77. See G. Florovsky, "Sobornost: The Catholicity of the Church", in: Br. Gallaher – P. Ladouceur (eds.), *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, T&T Clark, London 2019, pp. 257-271, esp. p. 266: "If we declare Scripture to be self-sufficient, we only expose it to subjective, arbitrary interpretation, thus cutting it away from its sacred source. Scripture is given to us in tradition. It is the vital, crystallizing centre. The Church, as the Body of Christ, stands mystically first and is fuller than Scripture".

78. See N. A. Nissiotis, "The Unity of Scripture and Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox Contribution to the Prolegomena of Hermeneutics", *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 11 (1965/66), pp. 183-208, esp. p. 206.

79. See S. Agourides, "Biblical Studies in Orthodox Theology", *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17 (1972), pp. 51-62, esp. p. 56.

80. See, for example, P. J. Bratsiotis, „Ein orthodoxer Beitrag“, in: Al. Richardson – W. Schweitzer (eds.), *Die Autorität der Bibel heute*, Gotthelf-Verlag, Zürich 1952, pp. 19-33, especially p. 22; K. B. Kallinikos, „Die hermeneutischen Prinzipien der orthodoxen Kirche“, in: L. Scheffczyk, W. Dettloff, R. Heinemann (eds.), *Wahrheit und Verkündigung* (FS Michael Schmaus I), Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, München – Paderbon – Wien 1967, pp. 415-428, esp. pp. 415-416.

to take cognizance of when he writes in a very telling litotes: “Tradition cannot be in disagreement with Scripture”<sup>81</sup>. For we actually know that some Orthodox practices and teachings, while perceived by many Orthodox as tradition, are indeed incompatible with the biblical (and the early church) witness: A lot of Orthodox who come to the Sunday liturgy do not partake in holy communion; in many Orthodox parish churches and monasteries a homily is not perceived as an integral part of the divine liturgy; despite decades of serious and outstanding theological work, the Orthodox have failed and continue to fail in implementing female diaconate. As far as doctrine is concerned, one may refer to the Orthodox teaching about the perpetual virginity of the *Theotokos*, which cannot be readily inferred from the biblical evidence and may even be partially in tension with it from an exegetical viewpoint. To alleviate this problem, Orthodox theologians, following in Bulgakov’s footsteps, usually affirm the pre-eminence and normative character of the Bible<sup>82</sup> and emphasize that tradition should not develop against scripture<sup>83</sup>. In this vein, Thomas Hopko, for instance, writes:

Once the Bible has been constituted as the scripture of the Church, it becomes its main written authority, within the Church and not over or apart from it. Everything in the Church is judged by the Bible. Nothing in the Church may contradict it<sup>84</sup>.

Yet, regrettably, this scriptural normativity remains very often theoretical. As the above-mentioned examples reveal, the critical voice of scripture within tradition is more often than not stifled by a wide range of -isms, such as immobilism, clericalism, and fundamentalism, and is

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81. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, op.cit., p. 18 (footnote 47). See also Bulgakov, “Dogma and Dogmatic Theology”, op.cit., p. 69: “Theology cannot include ideas that could not be directly or indirectly confirmed by the Word of God, or contrary to it” (footnote 64).

82. See, for example, Kallinikos, „Die hermeneutischen Prinzipien der orthodoxen Kirche“, op.cit., p. 417.

83. See, for instance, Th. G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*, Volume One: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline Mass. 1997, pp. 212-214.

84. Th. Hopko, “The Bible in the Orthodox Church”, *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 14 (1970), pp. 66-99, esp. pp. 66-67.

far from exerting an all-embracing and pervasive impact in church life. To be sure, the Orthodox do not need a *sola scriptura* principle to reform their church, but, without contesting the fact that the Bible is an integral part of tradition, they certainly need an implementable *prima scriptura* to draw this church closer to the logic of an egalitarian community gathered in circle around Jesus the Christ in the eucharist. We Orthodox are urged to hold, rediscover, or develop a vivid awareness that, while being infallible by virtue of the Holy Spirit dwelling in her, the church is also *semper reformanda* in that sense that her life should conform to the criteria provided by the biblical narrative. In Th. G. Stylianopoulos's words, we need a "full application of the patristic ideal of the *authority* and *centrality* of the Bible in Orthodox life and theology"<sup>85</sup>.

2. The second issue is that of methodology. Both Antoniadis and Bulgakov seem to have been fascinated by the exegetical renewal sparked by historical criticism and try thus to draw, each in his own way, the hermeneutical implications therefrom. While Antoniadis attempts, as it were, to rehabilitate the literal sense by invoking the authority of the exegetical school of Antioch, and to relativize typology by elaborating a theory capable of channeling it lest it would drift into an uncontrollable plurality of meanings, Bulgakov does not cower from the vast array of new exegetical methods provided by what he calls the "modern hermeneutics of textual and historical scholarship"<sup>86</sup>. Both approaches differ considerably from an opinionated, quasi-dogmatic hermeneutical pattern championed by a number of neo-patristic theologians, such as G. Florovsky<sup>87</sup> and J. Breck<sup>88</sup>, who have sought to elevate typology to the rank of an Orthodox method *par excellence*. Apart from the legitimate question of why Orthodox exegetes would have to use typology, one

85. Th. G. Stylianopoulos, "Toward an Orthodox Hermeneutics", in: E. J. Pentiuc (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Orthodox Christianity*, Oxford University Press, New York 2022, pp. 301-321, 317.

86. Bulgakov, "Dogma and Dogmatic Theology", op.cit., p. 71.

87. See G. Florovsky, "Revelation and Interpretation", in: *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, vol. I. The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont Mass. 1972, pp. 17-36.

88. See J. Breck, *The Power of the Word in the Worshipping Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York 1997.

cannot sidestep the query whether typology can be deemed a method at all in view of the groundbreaking achievements of modern human sciences and their obvious tendency to attach to the concept of method very sharp contours and well-defined criteria. Unlike the church fathers, modern scholarship has a more rigorous sense of what a scientific method is about. The ongoing debate about whether an Orthodox exegete, by virtue of his/her confessional affiliation, is bound to favor, or to exclude, a method is inextricably linked to the question of how an Orthodox scholar should relate to church tradition. This inevitably leads us to the third issue to be addressed here, namely freedom.

3. It is no coincidence to touch upon the question of freedom when reflecting on hermeneutics. By the beginning of the 1970s, during the *First International Theological Conference of Orthodox Theologians in America*, Th. G. Stylianopoulos identified the issue of “freedom of research” and “freedom of thought within theology and the Church” as one of the burning issues related to hermeneutics<sup>89</sup>. Both Antoniadis and Bulgakov hammer home the freedom of theological thought. For Antoniadis, it is a precious gift. For Bulgakov, there is no theological science without freedom. However, if it were to abide by what we usually subsume under church theology, freedom cannot be absolute and must remain faithful to what is viewed as inalterable truth. This is why both Antoniadis and Bulgakov seek to establish a sort of balance between freedom and compliance. According to Antoniadis, the interpreter is bound to what has been formulated in a solemn and consensual fashion. In Bulgakov’s eyes, what is really binding are the dogmas as formulated by the ecumenical councils. The question of what is abiding and what is temporary in theology, how to discern them, and how they relate to each other, not only has by no means faded into insignificance since Antoniadis and Bulgakov wrote their books, but it has also become perhaps the most crucial question for contemporary Orthodox theologians, and is answered by them very differently. Whether we classify a theological approach, or a theological treatise, as a liberal, moderate, conservative, or dogmatic one, depends more often than not on how this question is answered. It

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89. See Stylianopoulos, “Biblical Studies in Orthodox Theology”, op.cit., p. 78 (footnote 1).

is this answer too, by virtue of its criterial character, that conditions how we relate to extremely controversial matters such as women's ordination, homosexuality, or gender issues in general. Orthodox theology, which is wrestling today with this question, is unlikely to reach a consensus thereon in the upcoming years. This is, however, no reason to dispense with theological reflection. On the contrary. This is one more reason why in our theology a hermeneutical sense is badly needed and why hermeneutical inquiry must be enhanced and promoted.