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EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

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The usual meta-narrative constructed for contemporary Orthodox theology divides the Russian religious thought of Vladimir Solov'ev, Pavel Florensky and Sergius Bulgakov from the authentic "neo-patristic" synthesis of Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky and their later interpreters. The "neo-patristic synthesis" is seen as the moment in which contemporary Orthodox theology continues the consensus of the fathers, which was last developed by Gregory Palamas. Part of this meta-narrative is a strict divide between Orthodox theology as developed in the Greek fathers and continued in the "neo-patristic" synthesis, and all of "western" Christian theology, which encompasses both Protestant and Roman Catholic thought. The greatest mistake of the "West," according to this story, is its failure to develop the essence–energies distinction, which led to its denial of *theosis* and ultimately to the nihilism of Nietzsche. This meta-narrative has been extremely influential in shaping the mindset of contemporary Orthodox Christians, having been taught in Orthodox theological schools and seminaries throughout the world from the latter half of the twentieth century until the present. It has even led to the emergence of a kind of "convertism" in the Orthodox tradition, in which many from the West who convert to Orthodox Christianity do so on the basis of the truth of this meta-narrative, especially the diametrical opposition between East and West, and, as a result, are invested in the truth of this narrative.

This meta-narrative, however, is false. I will suggest its falsity by showing the "neo-patristic" character of Sergius Bulgakov's theology, and how categories central to Vladimir Lossky's theology, often thought as a break with Russian religious philosophy, were inherited from Bulgakov. Many of these distinctions, especially the person–nature distinction, became identifying markers of contemporary Orthodox theology. I will also show how much that is promoted by contemporary Orthodox theologians as evidence of an East–West divide is simply constructed in the post-colonial attempt by Orthodox to re-establish an intellectual tradition that is uniquely Orthodox. Much that passes as diametrically opposed divisions between East and West is unsustainable.

Revival after the fall

It is impossible to make sense of contemporary Orthodox theology without attention to its colonized past. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Orthodox intellectual tradition was decimated, without any signs of revival until nineteenth-century Russia. Gregory Palamas's work exists within contemporary Orthodox consciousness as the climax of the Greek patristic tradition. Palamas argues for the realism of divine–human communion (*theosis*) against a Byzantine humanist tradition that was suspicious of any talk of union with God. One could interpret Palamas's efforts as saving the Orthodox tradition from the split between theology and spirituality that became the hallmark of medieval western theology after the fifteenth century. Even if the Orthodox intellectual tradition was decimated by the Ottoman imperial oppression, Palamas's defense of the realism of divine–human communion was preserved, practiced and lived within the monastic communities during the Ottoman occupation. It is also central to the theology of the *Philokalia*, a compilation of patristic texts organized by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (ca. 1749–1809), and subsequently translated into Slavonic. The liturgical and monastic sensibility of Orthodox Christianity in terms of divine–human communion would once again begin to receive intellectual articulation in nineteenth-century Russia.

Ironically, the revival of an Orthodox theology that would distinguish itself by its anti-Westernism is owed to the West. After centuries of intellectual dormancy as a result of the Ottoman occupation of most of the Orthodox world, signs of revival began in Russia after the initiation of Western reforms by Tsar Peter I. Theological academies were established during the nineteenth century in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev and Kazan; however, these theological academies were not known for theological creativity. Their curriculum mirrored the Protestant scholastic manuals, and classes were taught in Latin until the early nineteenth century. What did emerge from the theological academies were patristic studies, a fact which, to this day, has still not been sufficiently appreciated. They are cited throughout the dogmatic trilogy of Sergius Bulgakov, and, in all probability, contributed to the patristic revival that occurred within Orthodox theology in the twentieth century.

More creatively, there emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century a trajectory of thinking within Russia labeled as Slavophilism, which attempted to identify in opposition to Western Christianity the distinctiveness of Orthodoxy in terms of thought and as a way of life. Although the Slavophiles self-identified Orthodoxy vis-à-vis the proximate other – the West – influences of modern Western philosophy, primarily German Romanticism and Idealism, are evident throughout their writings. The most well-known of all the Slavophiles is Alexei Khomiakov (1804–60), who characterized the distinctively Orthodox experience of the Church as *sobornost*, which is usually translated as catholicity but which attempts to convey a fullness of the experience of God in the Church that manifests itself as a unity or communion of persons (Shevzov 2013). This particular understanding of the ecclesial experience in terms of *sobornost* would become extremely influential in the twentieth-century Orthodox development of Eucharistic ecclesiology.

Sophiology

Less antagonistic to the West was the intellectual trajectory known as sophiology, the father of which is considered to be Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900). If Khomiakov is identified with the concept of *sobornost*, Solov'ev is known for developing a metaphysic around the concept of the humanity of God (*bogochelovechestvo*). With the concept of the humanity of God, Solov'ev may be read as attempting to give expression to at least two theological axioms: (1) Creation is created for union with the uncreated God; and (2) it is impossible to think God's relation to the world without thinking God relating to creation in some way from all eternity. Although creation is distinct from God, its very existence is grounded in the being of God. Sophia would name, for Solov'ev, the being of God as the all-unity, which, as the content of God as all-unity, is the fulfillment of created existence. Sophia, as the content of God's being, is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ (Gallaher 2009).

Although eclectic in their approach to the wider Orthodox intellectual tradition, both Khomiakov and Solov'ev serve as icons of trajectories within nineteenth-century Russia that signal a revival of the Orthodox intellectual tradition that is centered on the Orthodox notion of divine–human communion. After centuries of oppression, Orthodox theology returns to where Palamas left off – defending the realism of divine–human communion, which would become the non-negotiable first principle that would shape contemporary Orthodox theology. What these thinkers reignited within Orthodoxy, in their own context, was a tradition of thinking on divine–human communion.

Bulgakov the theologian

The centrality of the realism of divine–human communion is especially evident in the extensive theological writings of Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944). The sophiological tradition attributed to Solov'ev would find its theological culmination in Bulgakov's massive trilogy *On Divine Humanity* (*O bogochelovechestve*, 1933–45). Bulgakov is usually interpreted as attempting to map the Orthodox dogmatic tradition onto a philosophical metaphysic influenced by Solov'ev's sophiology and German Idealism, particularly the thought of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854). A careful reading of Bulgakov's work will reveal that, rather than interpreting Orthodox dogmas in light of Schelling, Bulgakov is attempting to construct a distinctive Orthodox theological response *against* the God–world relationship as conceptualized by German Idealism. He attempts such a response by situating his own theology as continuous with the broader patristic tradition, while admittedly attempting to amplify what he identifies as the insights of patristic thinking on the God–world relation understood in terms of divine–human communion.

What separates Bulgakov from Khomiakov and Solov'ev is the way he embeds his own thought within the broader, linear tradition of thinking on divine–human communion that is evident in the Greek patristic tradition; what separates Bulgakov from his more well-known contemporaries, Vladimir Lossky and Georges Florovsky, is that Bulgakov was more willing to engage critically the patristic tradition by

demonstrating how each of the major patristic authors contributed to making sense of the God–world relation in terms of divine–human communion, and where he thinks they failed. It would be misleading to accuse him simplistically of saying that the fathers are wrong, or that the fathers need to be corrected by German Idealist philosophy. Bulgakov sees the Orthodox tradition as attempting to construct a theology of the God–world relation that is grounded in the revelation of the divine in Christ, and sees his own work as continuing that effort. By self-consciously embedding his own theology within the wider Greek patristic tradition, and in attempting to construct a synthesis from this tradition in relation to a contemporary context that poses its own unique questions and challenges, Bulgakov can be considered to be the first Orthodox theologian to offer what Florovsky would later call a *neo-patristic synthesis*. It is usually thought that Florovsky coined this phrase against Bulgakov, but it appeared in print for the first time precisely in the context of *praising* Bulgakov for attempting to relate the tradition of the church to the searchings of the modern world in a manner faithful to the church.[1] The debate between Bulgakov and Florovsky cannot, then, be framed as philosophy versus theology, or tradition versus modernity, but more on how to relate philosophy and theology in terms of their shared starting-point: the realism of divine–human communion.

Bulgakov interprets the Greek patristic tradition as attempting to theologize about that which is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ – the union of the divine and the creaturely. He repeatedly emphasizes the priority of this event of revelation for Christian theology (Bulgakov 2008: 134). The history of Christian thought entails the attempt to articulate the truth of this revelation through dogmas and theology. Central to the theological articulation of divine–human communion in Christ, according to Bulgakov, is the distinction between *ousia* (essence/nature) and *hypostasis*. Although this distinction was necessary for Christology and trinitarian theology, the significance of this distinction for understanding the God–world relation in terms of divine–human communion was not sufficiently developed. More than simply serving as categories for expressing the union of the divine and human natures in Christ, and the three-in-oneness of God as Trinity, the distinction between nature and hypostasis points to an anthropological truth of the human person's existence as open to communion with the divine. It is only by developing this anthropological truth that theology can account for the God–world relation in terms of divine–human communion.

This anthropological truth is clarified in a phenomenology of created spirit. Created spirit is the consciousness of self as the self-revelation of self as I. The I, however, is not an empty, formless, contentless I; it has content and, thus, has a nature. The I as self-consciousness-as-self-revelation is the actualization of the I in relation to an other than the I-as-Spirit, which is nature, which the I as spirit realizes in itself for itself. This other, formally, is the nature of spirit, which is the predicate of the I-as-subject; nature is the object of the I-as-subject. This nature is not something that the I freely chooses, but is given to the I to be realized as spirit, to exist as spirit. Thus, Spirit is the unity of subject and object, of subject and predicate, as the I is the movement to realize all that it is as given to it in nature; and this realization is nature becoming more transparent to the I. It is also the movement to overcoming the antithesis between freedom and necessity, and toward the existence of the I as

free necessity. According to Bulgakov, "[i]t is proper to spirit to have a personal consciousness, a hypostasis, and a nature as its self-revelation, and the life of spirit consists in the living out of this personal self-revelation in its nature. In spirit are given: I, as personal self-consciousness; nature, as the source of its self-revelation; and revelation itself as the life of the spirit in its nature" (Bulgakov 2004: 61).

In this phenomenology of created spirit, it is difficult not to discern the influence of German Idealist thought, and it is, perhaps, in this understanding of the human person that Bulgakov is most vulnerable to the charge of being influenced by philosophy. Such a charge, however, ignores the fact that Bulgakov saw such an anthropology implicit in the Greek fathers' distinction between hypostasis and nature. More than this, he argues several times that such an understanding of the human person is given in revelation (Bulgakov 2008: 89). One sees here resonances with Karl Rahner's approach, who argues from the premise of the self-communication of God to a transcendental anthropology accounting for the human person as possible recipient of a self-communication of God. Bulgakov's appropriation of the German Idealist tradition is, much like Rahner's use of philosophy (Kilby 2004), more ad hoc than directly grounded in a particular system. If, again like Rahner, there is a foundationalist strain in Bulgakov in the sense that his theology is informed by what he would argue is a universal dimension to human existence, it is a foundationalism informed by the prior affirmation of the divine–human communion in Christ. Finally, it should be noted that Bulgakov's identification of nature with givenness/necessity and person/spirit with freedom will become formative for the development of twentieth-century Orthodox theology of the Trinity (Papanikolaou 2008). One sees a similar distinction in Vladimir Lossky, who attributes it to the Cappadocian fathers without any mention of Bulgakov's use of the distinction.

Thus, the life of Spirit is personal or hypostatic self-consciousness, which is mediated through self-revelation of self, which as the self-revelation of self is identified with nature. If the logic of this phenomenology of spirit as personal self-consciousness is self-evident in the created realm, then it must also apply to God, who is Absolute Spirit. God is Spirit, and, as Spirit, God is self-consciousness of God's self. As self-consciousness, God knows God's self, which means that God reveals God to God's self. Self-consciousness-as-self-revelation of self is a relation to self through an other than the self. In God, there can be no givenness, so this relation of God to God's self cannot exist "outside" of God. The self-consciousness as self-revelation of God is through the positing of God to God's self; i.e., the other in and through which God knows God's self is not given to God, but is God, though God as other to God's self. This other is God's Word/Logos/Son. The Son is God's predicate, object, content of all that God is reflected back to the self-positing Absolute Spirit, i.e., the Father. In self-positing the Word/Logos/Predicate/Object/Content of God to God's self, Absolute Spirit is positing love of this content, which is distinct from the content itself, and which is the person of the Holy Spirit. The Son returns all that the Father is to the Father through a reciprocating love for the Father; without this reciprocating love, then, Absolute Spirit is narcissistically loving itself in its reflection of itself. The Self-consciousness of God as self-revelation is the actualization by the Holy Spirit of the Word that is posited, which is a reciprocal return of this Word to the self-positing Father. This actualization by the Holy Spirit is the Glory

and Beauty as Life of this Word. This is what Bulgakov means by trinitarian deduction: an account of the Self-differentiation of God as Spirit is the ground for creation, because without this self-differentiation God is undifferentiated, unrelatable spirit. Only God's being as differentiated otherness, as self-differentiation as self-revelation, can we think how God can relate to what is "other" than God (Papanikolaou 2011).

Sophia is divine *ousia* hypostatized. Ousia is not simply that to which one assigns attributes; it is the being of God as God's self-revelation. As divine ousia hypostatized, and identified with revelation of God, it is all that God is, which must include a relation of God to creation, in some way, but not in time/space. Another way to put it is that all that is possible for creation is revealed in the self-positing and actualization of the Word.

Creation is the action of the Holy Trinity. As the Word of God's Wisdom, the Son is the hypostasis who images created being, of all that God is for creation, and all that creation is meant to be for God. The Word, however, needs the movement of the Holy Spirit to be actualized. Creation is the becoming in time and space of all that is imaged in the Logos from eternity. The world is created Sophia, because it images and is a movement toward realization of all that is imaged from eternity in the Logos – what God is for creation and what creation is meant to be for God.

Sophia, thus, is divine humanity (*bogochelovechestvo*), because Sophia as self-revelation of God eternally images all that God is for creation and all that creation is meant to be for God. Creation is an ontologically distinct essence, but is divine as the image of that which is eternally imaged; it is, thus, created Sophia. The Logos is heavenly man, because from eternity the Logos is the hypostasis that can be incarnate, or can incarnate created nature. It can do so because it is spirit, and because the hypostatization of ousia, which is Sophia, eternally images created nature as created Sophia. The ontological link, then, is Spirit, which is distinct from nature, energies and hypostasis, but is the realization of nature/energies/hypostasis as free necessity, and, as such, is imageable in the temporal and spatial structures of creation.

The apophatic turn

After his death in 1945, Sergius Bulgakov would be forgotten in the Orthodox theological world, largely due to the criticisms leveled against his theology by Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky. These two theologians are often uncritically co-joined as the fathers of the neo-patristic trajectory within contemporary Orthodox theology, a phrase coined by Florovsky in the late 1930s and which is usually understood as a return to the authentic patristic tradition. It would be unfair to conflate Florovsky and Lossky both in terms of their critique of Bulgakov and in terms of how they envisioned the return to the fathers. Florovsky's critique of Bulgakov was not directed against any undue influence by philosophy per se, but by German Idealist influences that are evident in Bulgakov's understanding of theology as a speculative system, and which led Bulgakov to an insufficient differentiation between the uncreated and the created. Contrary to the way that he has been interpreted by his Orthodox theological admirers, Florovsky was not against reason in

theology (Baker 2010); he attempted to articulate an approach to theology that is hermeneutical, and which is grounded in an eschatological understanding of creation and history as the arena of God's actions, which then must be interpreted. Neo-patristic synthesis never meant, for Florovsky, a freezing of categories of thought in a particular golden age of Christian Hellenism, but a hermeneutical reappropriation within a given historical context that is also faithful to the truths articulated within the tradition.

Lossky's approach was more directly anti-philosophical and anti-rational (Papanikolaou 2006). For Lossky, humans were created for mystical union with God and theology must serve this existential goal. As a result, theology must be necessarily apophatic insofar as an apophatic theology does not allow for the reification of theology in speculative systems, which, for Lossky, threaten the ascetical struggle to mystical union. Lossky's logic is that a rational attempt to understand the beyond-reason, antinomic union of the uncreated and the created, realized in Christ, implies that knowledge of God is equivalent to rationally justifiable propositional truths. Such a conception of theology forgets that true knowledge of God is union with the living God. Apophaticism, thus, for Lossky is not simply an epistemological category; it is not simply meant to signify the limits of, or the excessiveness of, the revelation of God to human knowing. It is an existential attitude that does not allow the knowledge of God to be identified with the logic of human reasoning so as to free the person for an authentic encounter with the living God, i.e., for *theosis*. Toward this end, theology must be inherently antinomic, attempting to find the distinctions and categories that express antinomic truths about the God–world relation, so as to ensure that these truths about God are never reduced to a particular philosophical logic. Lossky targeted, in particular, Neo-Scholasticism and Bulgakov's sophiology as two glaring examples of philosophically infected theology. The irony is that all of Lossky's major categories – antinomy, the person-as-freedom versus nature-as-necessity distinction, kenosis of the Son and the kenosis of the Spirit, individual versus person – are all found in Bulgakov, though Lossky presents them as emerging from the patristic tradition. It appears as if Lossky is co-opting these central categories of Bulgakov and apophaticizing them so as to present self-consciously an anti-sophiological theology.

The one distinction that is central to Lossky's thought, and one that Bulgakov struggled to integrate into his theology, is the essence/energies distinction. Lossky identifies this distinction as the core of the Greek patristic tradition, separating the Greek fathers' emphasis on *theosis* from the more rationalist-oriented theologies of thinkers like Origen. This distinction, together with Lossky's understanding of the person/nature distinction, would become formative for Orthodox theology of the last half-century.

Essence/energies

It is no exaggeration to say that, of all the twentieth-century Orthodox theologians, Lossky's theology has exercised the greatest influence on both Orthodox theologians and Catholic and Protestant theologians for understanding Orthodoxy. This influence

could be attributed to the fact that Lossky's *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Lossky 1997) was translated from the French into English in 1957 and constituted an accessible book that presented the various themes of theology in a systematic fashion centered on the notion of deification. Ironically, Lossky the anti-rationalist presented a well-reasoned, highly speculative apophatic theology. What Florovsky coined as a neo-patristic synthesis would take the form in Orthodox theology of an appropriation of Lossky's central categories – apophaticism, essence/energies distinction and person/nature distinction, which is clearly evident in the post-1960s generation of Greek theologians, such as John Romanides and Christos Yannaras (Kalaitzidis 2010). Lossky's direct attack on the influence of rationalism in theology, as evidenced by Neo-Scholasticism and Bulgakovian sophiology, would become the basis for constructing an anti-Westernism which sees the failure of all Western Christian theology and Western civilization as rooted in Augustine's rejection of the distinction of the essence/energies distinction (Demacopoulos and Papanikolaou 2008). It is difficult not to read the valorization of the essence/energies distinction in contemporary Orthodox theology as a form of self-identification vis-à-vis the West, especially since the post-1960s generation of theologians in Greece was vigorously fighting against the Western-style manuals that were produced by its Orthodox teachers and that functioned as text-books within the theological curriculum in Greece. Insofar as the books of this generation of theologians, including those of Lossky, function as inspirations for Western converts to the mystical theology of Orthodoxy, there is a great deal of investment within the Orthodox community for this story of the West's rejection of the essence/energies distinction and, thus, of *theosis*, to be true. It is, however, simply untrue that deification was rejected in Western theology, even if it was never expressed through the essence/energies distinction. Given the decimation of the intellectual tradition within Orthodoxy by both the Ottomans and the Communists, one wonders how much the anti-Westernism in Orthodox theology is simply a post-colonial attempt at constructing an identity based on a supposed pure, unalloyed Orthodoxy.

Created for communion

Within this generation of Greek theologians of the 1960s John Zizioulas stands as the most ecumenically influential, and he has self-consciously characterized his own theology as continuing the neo-patristic synthesis of Florovsky, his professor at Harvard. Zizioulas cannot be accused of anti-Westernism in the sense of seeing the entire cultural heritage of the "West" since Augustine as culminating in the nihilism of Nietzsche, and as diametrically opposed to the Hellenistic-Byzantine ethos (Papanikolaou 2006). He does, however, set up a diametrical opposition between an Augustinian-inspired trinitarian theology that is grounded in the one essence of God and the Cappadocian trinitarian theology that prioritizes the person. According to Zizioulas, the Cappadocian fathers accomplished nothing less than an ontological revolution in articulating a trinitarian theology that simultaneously affirms an ontology in which being-as-communion prioritizes the particular over that which is the same. This trinitarian theology is itself rooted in the Christian

experience of the eucharistic, which is the event of the eschatological body of Christ, and, as such, *is* Church. The eucharistic event is one of a communion of persons in the person of Christ, in whom humans are constituted by the Holy Spirit as *hypostatic* (unique) and *ekstatic* (free from the necessity of created nature) beings in and through relations to God the Father and to all of creation. Such an experience of the divine required two ontological leavenings: (1) the radical distinction between the uncreated and the created as the basis for a communion that is free and loving; and (2) grounding the trinitarian being of God in the person of the Father. Regarding the latter, Zizioulas famously asserts: "the Father out of love – that is, freely – begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit. If God exists, He exists because the Father exists, that is, He who out of love freely begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit. Thus God as person – as the hypostasis of the Father – makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God" (Zizioulas 1985). Zizioulas's claims about the monarchy of the Father are informed by existential concerns: He identifies as basic to human existence a longing for uniqueness, but one that is only realizable in relations of love and in a freedom – *ekstasis* – from nature. This hope can be fulfilled only in relation to the eternal God, but only if God's being is itself free from the necessity of nature, since God can give only what God *is*. One question raised by this understanding of the monarchy of the Father is whether the Son and the Spirit have the same freedom as that of the Father.

The Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–93) is similar to Zizioulas in that he searches for that in human experience which would allow for clarification and understanding of the dogmatic tradition. The dogmas are not sterile propositions, but must speak to the realism of divine–human communion and, thus, must resonate with life experiences. Stăniloae, Zizioulas and Bulgakov all attempt to interpret the dogmatic tradition in the light of some aspect of human experience, though Stăniloae and Zizioulas do so in a more exploratory fashion, rather than, as Bulgakov does, locating a foundationalist grounding within the human experience of self. The point of focus for Stăniloae is the movement of dialogue in relationships of love. In unison with all contemporary Orthodox theologians, Stăniloae affirms that humans were created for union with God. Human beings, like no other living beings, realized this union through a dialogue of love that God initiated from the moment of creation. Stăniloae affirms a notion of creation as God's gift that initiates the possibility of an exchange of gifts between God and human beings, who function as priests of creation. This exchange of gifts is simultaneously a dialogue of love enabling a personal communion between God and creation. The fact that the world was created for the purpose of communion between the personal God and human persons is a truth of revelation confirmed by the human experience of freedom and relationality.

What is remarkable about contemporary Orthodox theology, especially after Ottoman and Communist oppression, is the absolute consensus among Orthodox theologians on the realism of divine–human communion. What needs to be recognized more clearly is the diversity within Orthodox theology as a tradition of thinking on divine–human communion. The voice of Sergius Bulgakov also needs to be recovered in this conversation, especially since he is the first to reignite this tradition of thinking on divine–human communion in a way that attempts a critical

continuity with the Greek patristic tradition through Gregory Palamas. Contemporary Orthodox theologians should also be inspired by Bulgakov in clarifying how the mystical is also the prophetic/political.

See also Doctrine of God (Chapter 35), Christology (Chapter 36), Ecclesiology (Chapter 39), Pneumatology (Chapter 41), Soteriology (Chapter 42), The Trinity (Chapter 43).

Notes

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1 I owe this point to Matthew Baker.

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