

A Brief Historical Survey of Some Russian Orthodox Historians and Theologians in the American Academy over the Last 125 Years

D. Oliver Herbel

Introduction

There has not been, to the best of my knowledge, an attempt to write a comprehensive history of Orthodox Christians in the American academy.¹ Nor am I aware of a general historical survey or summary. This remains the case even if we concentrate purely on scholarship done by Orthodox scholars relating to topics directly affecting church history and theology such as religion, history, and sociology. Only recently have Orthodox engagements with the larger academy have received any attention,² but the history of Orthodox engagement with the American academy remains in need of better articulation. The reason for this certainly is not a lack of archival

¹ It should be noted that for the purposes of this essay, by “American academy,” I mean the extensive system of accredited (provisionally or fully) universities and colleges throughout the United States as well as scholarly societies and associations but not Orthodox seminaries, though I am also unaware of any systematic history of Orthodox seminaries. The seminaries have been discussed in various jurisdictional histories, however, and occasional essays such as the one by John Meyendorff in *A Legacy of Excellence: St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1938–1988* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988).

² See, e.g., James S. Cutsinger, “The Once and Future College: Rose Hill in Theory and Practice,” delivered at an Orthodox Theological Society of America (OTSA) conference and available at http://www.cutsinger.net/pdf/once_and_future_college.pdf.

information. Each Orthodox jurisdiction in America contains archival holdings.³ Moreover, there are archives related to Orthodoxy and the American academy in places such as the New York State Library and the Bakhmeteff Archive at Columbia University, not to mention individual holdings at various institutions and foreign archives shedding light on members of the émigré communities.⁴ Nor would the reason for this situation be due to a lack of perceptible framework. If one takes just the Russian end of things, for example, a discernible historical pattern according to the two world wars certainly presents itself.⁵ Omitting this leaves out a significant piece of Orthodoxy and higher education within the United States.

Addressing this aspect of Orthodoxy and higher education is precisely what I shall begin to explore here. Because a full treatment of this topic would be a larger project than what is

³ It should be noted, however, that their organization and the access to them may both leave much to be desired. Despite these limitations, the archivists do the best they can. Alex Liberovsky at the OCA archives has been very helpful to me at various points in my own research. Hopefully the future will bring a heightened awareness within the Orthodox Churches in America of the importance of such historical archives.

⁴ The New York State Library holds court records and legal documents that can be relevant to Orthodox history in America while the Bakhmeteff Archive contains many files of personal papers and is the second largest repository of Russian émigré materials. In addition to the two archives just mentioned, I make use of some archives containing personal papers as well, including the Mikhail Karpovich Papers, Harvard University Manuscript Collections and Florovsky's papers at Princeton. An inventory of important archives relating to Orthodox history and theology in North America is badly needed, but well beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁵ In addition to this basic historical framework, one could also note a possible thematic framework including categories such as early converts, émigrés and various "hyphenated" American Orthodox (be it Greek-American, Russian-American, etc.) who either came to America at an early age or were part of the second generation, following their parents' emigration. I have, admittedly, omitted such figures, including Fr. Michael Gelsinger, Fr. Demetrios Constantelos, Peter Charanis, and John E. Rexine, the latter of whom I cite below. A fuller treatment of this topic would allow for such categories to be utilized and a broader and more thorough assessment of Orthodoxy's engagement of the American academy. For example, Gelsinger was instrumental in establishing the Byzantine (OrthCathA) collection at the University of Buffalo.

feasible here, I shall utilize the historical pattern of Russian Orthodox in the American academy. As we shall see, there are enough significant figures in this history to allow for a discernible historical narrative. As I shall demonstrate, the trajectory of Russian Orthodox engagement with American academia has shifted from a parochial concern with Russian liberalism to being subsumed under area studies in the humanities because of concerns with Russia's role in history and politics to a free and honest engagement of the West from a self-consciously Orthodox Christian perspective. This shift occurred over approximately one hundred twenty-five years. It demonstrates a change in Orthodox self-identity within the West as well, for "Russia" came to dominate less as the reality of the Western, American context took hold. With this shift, however, came a tension between standing firm upon Orthodox ecclesiastical claims on the one hand, and a refusal to be reduced to mere sectarianism or parochialism on the other.

Pre-World War I

The Russian Orthodox Church had been on the North American continent since 1794. Initially, that presence was in Alaska, but by 1870, and officially by 1872, the center of the Russian mission had shifted to San Francisco. In 1904, it would shift to New York (expanding the missionary diocese so that it covered the entire continent). The first serious, extended engagement between a Russian Orthodox scholar and the American academy occurred in the case of Vasili Bouroff. Bouroff had graduated from the St. Petersburg Theological Academy and served as the choir director at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Church (later Holy Trinity Cathedral) in Chicago.⁶ In 1895, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, he was removed from his position because Bishop Nicholas (bishop of the Russian Mission in North America from 1891–1898) disapproved of Bouroff studying at the University of Chicago, although some in the parish were supportive of Bouroff's decision and

⁶ "New Russian Church," *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 1895.