

## The Contributions of Georges Florovsky, Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff to the Development of Orthodoxy in America<sup>1</sup>

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The contributions of Fathers Georges Florovsky (1893–1979), Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983) and John Meyendorff (1926–1992), three eminent theologians, educators, and churchmen, to the development of Orthodoxy in America are enormous, spanning a number of different but interrelated areas. Following a brief biographical overview, this article presents an overview, necessarily somewhat schematic, of their contributions to Orthodoxy in America in terms of five broad themes, concluding with some remarks on their impact on Christian theology in general.

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### A. *Biographical Overview*

A brief outline of their biographies is useful to situate their work in the context of their lives. Biographical material for the three is limited, but there are two extensive biographical essays on Georges Florovsky.<sup>2</sup> There are no formal biographies of either Alexander Schmemmann or John Meyendorff – only short biographies and scattered remarks here and there. There are also several studies of the theology of Alexander Schmemmann which include biographical material,<sup>3</sup> and the personal diaries of Alexander Schmemmann covering the last ten years of his life.<sup>4</sup> These diaries contain considerable material concerning his earlier life, especially his childhood and adolescence in Paris. There is an urgent necessity for full-length biographies of all three.

As a general remark concerning our three subjects, note that they share several important characteristics:

- (1) They were of Russian culture by their family origin and upbringing.
- (2) All were part of the great Russian emigration that followed on the Russian Revolutions of 1917 and more particularly the triumph of the Bolsheviks in the civil war of 1918–1920.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Andrew Blane, “A Sketch of the Life of Georges Florovsky” in Andrew Blane, ed., *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997); and George Williams, “Georges Vasilievich Florovsky: His American Career (1948–1965),” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 11 (1965).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my “Bibliography of Father Alexander Schmemmann” in Paul Ladouceur, ed., *The Wedding Feast, Proceedings of the Orthodox Colloquia 2007, 2008 and 2009* (Montreal: Montreal Institute of Orthodox Theology and Alexander Press, 2010), 151–62. Michael Plekon’s *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) contains chapters on Schmemmann and Meyendorff. See also Juliana Schmemmann, *My Journey with Father Alexander* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Schmemmann’s *Journal* is written mostly in Russian, with some English and French. The English version is a selection of about forty percent of the original; the Russian and French editions are almost complete.

- (3) All spent an important part of their lives in Russian émigré circles in Paris, the intellectual and religious centre of the Russians in exile.
- (4) Each had an intimate association with the Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute, founded in Paris in 1925 as a centre of theological higher education and for many years the only school of Orthodox theological education situated outside countries of Orthodox tradition.
- (5) All three emigrated from France to the United States, where they spent the latter part of their lives.
- (6) They were also intimately involved with St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, where each taught and each served as dean.
- (7) All were committed to Orthodox participation in the broad ecumenical movement of the mid-twentieth century and were personally involved in ecumenical undertakings at different levels.

But these common characteristics must be tempered by major differences among the three theologians in terms of ancestry, personalities and interests, and also in their ages. Both Georges Florovsky's father and mother were descended from clerical families, whereas Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff were descended from minor nobility, who often frowned on clerical vocations. The three do not belong to the same generation. Florovsky was born in 1893, educated in pre-revolutionary Russia, and went into exile as an adult. Schmemmann and Meyendorff were both born in exile, Schmemmann in Estonia in 1921 and Meyendorff in France in 1926. They were thus "second-generation" exiles. Although Schmemmann and Meyendorff were unquestionably of Russian culture, they never lived in Russia, in contrast with Florovsky, who left Russia in 1920 when he was 26. Both Schmemmann and Meyendorff received their secondary education in the demanding French collegial system and were as much at ease in French culture as in Russian culture, and, later in their lives, in American culture.

*Georges Florovsky*

From its foundation until 1945, the Saint Sergius Institute was dominated by the great personality of Sergius Bulgakov, and it was through Bulgakov's initiative that in 1926 Georges Florovsky was invited to teach patristics at the Institute – even though Florovsky's own academic background was history and philosophy. It was Bulgakov who initially suggested that he study and teach patristics. Although Bulgakov and Florovsky respected each other, they were theological opponents, especially over Bulgakov's commitment to the controversial doctrine of sophiology.<sup>5</sup>

Florovsky taught patristics at St Sergius until 1939 and he spent the war years in Yugoslavia. In December 1945 he found his way back to Paris, but the situation had changed dramatically: the patristics chair was now occupied by Cyprian Kern and Bulgakov had died in July 1944. Florovsky began teaching dogmatic and moral theology at St Sergius, but many of the older professors still resented what they considered to be Florovsky's unwarranted criticism of Russian thought in general, especially in his monumental, if opinionated, *The Ways of Russian Theology* (1937), and of the much-beloved Bulgakov in particular.<sup>6</sup> Uncomfortable in this situation, Florovsky readily accepted an invitation to teach dogmatic theology and patristics at the fledgling Saint Vladimir's Theological Seminary in New York in 1948, where he became dean in 1949.

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of relations between Florovsky and Bulgakov, see Alexis Klimoff, "Georges Florovsky and the Sophiological Controversy," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49 (2005); and Paul Ladouceur, "'Aimons-nous les uns les autres': Serge Boulgakov et Georges Florovsky," *Contacts: Revue française d'orthodoxie* 64 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Georges Florovsky, *Puti russkogo bogosloviya*, [The Ways of Russian Theology] (Paris-Belgrade, 1937); English version (revised) in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, Vols. V and VI (Vaduz: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1972). In his introduction to the 1980 reprint of *Puti russkogo bogosloviya*, John Meyendorff, who studied under Florovsky in the late 1940s, writes that the psychological impulse and inspiration which underlay Florovsky's writings was the rejection of sophiology. Cf. "Predislovie" [Preface], Georges Florovsky, *Puti russhogo bogosloviia* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1980), 2.

In 1955, after only six years as dean, he was asked to leave Saint Vladimir's, following conflicts with ecclesiastical authorities, among them Schmemmann. After his departure, Florovsky returned to the omophorion of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, under the Greek Orthodox archbishop of America. Although he severed his canonical attachment to the Russian Orthodox diocese in North America (known as the "Metropolia"), he continued to frequent churches of the Metropolia. In early 1956 Florovsky was offered a position at the Harvard Divinity School, where he taught patristics and Russian culture and history. He also taught at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Theological Seminary in Brookline, Mass. In the autumn of 1964 he retired to Princeton, New Jersey, as visiting professor of Slavic studies and religion at Princeton University. He died in 1979 at the age of 86.

#### *Alexander Schmemmann*

Alexander Schmemmann was educated in the Russian Cadet School in Paris, and then in the French *lycée* system. He studied theology at Saint Sergius from 1940 to 1945, initially while Sergius Bulgakov was still dean.<sup>7</sup> Schmemmann then taught Church history at the Institute from 1945 until 1951, being ordained a priest in November 1946. It is likely that Schmemmann never actually studied under Florovsky, but was rather the latter's junior colleague on the teaching staff for about three years. He may have attended lectures given by Florovsky during this period, since Schmemmann was still a graduate student at the time.

But Schmemmann became unhappy with the atmosphere at the Institute and in 1951 he accepted an invitation from Florovsky to teach history and liturgical theology at St Vladimir's Seminary. Schmemmann received his doctorate in 1959

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<sup>7</sup> Schmemmann held Bulgakov in high personal regard, although he had no interest in Bulgakov's sophiology. Bulgakov nonetheless influenced Schmemmann's thought in subtle ways that have yet to be fully explored. See Schmemmann's "Tri Obrazi," *Vestnik RSKHD*, 101/102 (1971), 9–24; trans. 'Trois Portraits' [Father Serge Bulgakov 1871–1944], *Le Messager orthodoxe* (1972).