

On the Uses of John Damascene’s *Dialectica* for Orthodox Christian Discourse

Joshua Schooping

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 72)

The present article is a discussion of the philosophical-theological mode in which Christian orthodoxy could critically engage with non-Christian modes of thought in a manner intentionally consistent with native metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions and commitments. Hermeneutics will be more or less the platform on which the notion of “Tradition,” informed by Gadamer and Florovsky, is raised so as to articulate how Christian tradition (for the present study largely derived from the philosophical work of John of Damascus) informs a hermeneutic mode of discourse, analysis, and worldview, what elsewhere has been called a hermeneutic of tradition. In short, this hermeneutic of tradition relative to historic orthodoxy refers in the first place to the intentional act of understanding according to the Scriptural, Apostolic, Patristic, and Conciliar norms as embodied and expressed by the particular Fathers and Ecumenical Councils of the historic, undivided Church, and the application of these norms, the *regula fidei*, or, perhaps yet more boldly, the “hermeneutic canons,” to contemporary problematics. The argument, then, seeks to show in light of Ricoeur’s theory of interpretation how John Damascene’s *Dialectica* fittingly provides a foundational conceptual apparatus integrating Christian epistemology and metaphysics into a coherent system of thought which provides tools for engaging contemporary philosophical discourse from within a consistently orthodox perspective.



John Damascene and a Living Tradition of Christian Philosophy

In engaging with non-Christian thought, whether it touches on such areas as metaphysics, epistemology, hermeneutics, literary theory, semiotics, rhetoric, etc., there can be a difficult time bringing Orthodox Christian thought to bear critically so as to engage meaningfully and “within a consistent Orthodox perspective.”¹ In this situation it becomes difficult to discern objectively what is consistent with Christian thought from what is not. Basil of Caesarea and John of Damascus both utilized the analogy of the bee to provide an image for the Christian engagement with non-Christian thought,² and so it is worth observing that bees do not take pollen from all flowers, and moreover, when they do take pollen they convert it for a use specific to the bees’ life and worldview. The analogy implies that there is discernment, a critical engagement, and then a deep chemical conversion turning that which is raw into something useful according to the Orthodox canon. This issue of discernment, then, is vital for the intellectually rigorous articulation of the gospel in coherent terms consonant with Orthodox doctrine.³

To set the stage for an answer to this, the notion of Tradition as providing “hermeneutic guidance” for a critical engagement with non-Orthodox thought needs to be raised. In doing so, we provide a more general framework by which Orthodox thought can be viewed in hermeneutic terms, and into which

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 117.

² John of Damascus, *Fount of Knowledge*, in *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, tr. Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), preface. See also Basil the Great, *Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, tr. Frederick Morgan Padelford, in *Essays on the Study and Use of Poetry by Plutarch and Basil the Great* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1902), 4.

³ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Pref. I.1. John states much the same of those who “by mixing evil with divine words through unjust lips and a crafty tongue, and trying to cover up its dark and shapeless form and shake the hearts of the unstable from the true customs, handed down from the fathers”: Id., *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, tr. Andrew Louth, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), II.4.

John Damascene's work can be incorporated specifically.⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer's discussion of tradition and authority as constituting an integral part of an interpretive community is useful for this, and can be set in conversation with Georges Florovsky's notion of Tradition.⁵ What will be identified below as a hermeneutic of tradition – Gadamer's attempt at restoring to the act of understanding, which is to say to hermeneutics, an anti-irrational notion of authority and tradition – provides solid contemporary groundwork for an "Eastern Orthodox" notion of a hermeneutic of tradition, which is to say the workings out of a particularly Orthodox hermeneutic of Tradition.⁶ As Gadamer states, distinct from a coercive tyranny, "acknowledging authority is always connected with the

⁴ More generally see Tad W. Guzie, "Patristic Hermeneutics and the Meaning of Tradition," *Theological Studies* 32 (1971): 647–58; Anthony Meredith, *The Theology of Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1971); and John McGuckin, "Recent Biblical Hermeneutics in Patristic Perspective: The Tradition of Orthodoxy," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 47 (2002): 295–326.

⁵ For a recent assessment of Florovsky's notion of Tradition in terms of his Neopatristic synthesis, see Paul Gavriluk's article, "Florovsky's Neopatristic Synthesis and the Future Ways of Orthodox Theology," in *Orthodox Constructions of the West* (New York: Fordham, 2013), 102–124. Hopefully the present study will respond in some measure to Gavriluk's statement concerning Florovsky that, "Though neopatristic synthesis was the guiding vision connecting all aspects of his scholarship, from Russian studies to ecumenical work, Florovsky never developed this vision into a comprehensive theological system" (102).

For a more critical view of Florovsky's Neopatristic synthesis, see Pantelis Kalaitzidis' article: "From the 'Return to the Fathers' to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010): 5–3. Additionally see Matthew Baker, "The Correspondence between T.F. Torrance and Georges Florovsky (1950–1973)," *Participatio: The Journal of the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship* 4 (2013): 287–323.

A balanced and nuanced assessment demonstrating the flexibility of the Neopatristic synthesis can be found in Paul Ladouceur's article: "Treasures New and Old: Landmarks of Orthodox Neopatristic Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 56 (2012): 191–227.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 277–307. There is a growing body of literature discussing the notion of both a hermeneutic of tradition and a hermeneutic of continuity. See, e.g., *The Hermeneutics of Tradition: Explorations and Examinations*, eds. Craig Hovey and Cyrus P. Olsen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014).