

Andrey Sheptytsky, the Ukrainian Catholic Church, and Radical Orthodoxy

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Abstract

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The author suggests that Metropolitan Andrew Sheptytsky (1865–1944) was a pioneer of the Radical Orthodoxy movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, especially in Sheptytsky's attention to the Fathers of the Church and the celebration of the liturgy.



In the programmatic volume *Radical Orthodoxy* edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, we find an important if paradoxical subtitle: *A New Theology*.¹ The paradox here is that in many respects what is new is their approach to, or method of doing, theology, and not so much the substance or contents which, in some respects, participate in the older movement of *ressourcement* and retrieval by attempting to get behind, and so outwit, the deleterious developments of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham in the late Middle Ages, and then newer figures in the modern period who have contributed to the secularism of our time.

¹ See *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999).

For Radical Orthodoxy (RO), one of the means of this outwitting is to be found in the “patristic matrix” of “creedal Christianity” which is held to be exemplary for theology today.² In giving an important place to the Fathers, RO does not, of course, see its task or method as that of “simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern,”³ that is to say, attempting to return to, or slavishly imitate, the Fathers. Such an approach was many years ago rightly denounced by such deeply patristic theologians as Hans Urs von Balthasar⁴ and George Florovsky⁵ as well as Alexander Schmemmann, who argued that

It is my impression that with a few exceptions, the “patristic revival” ... is a return much more to patristic *texts* than to the *mind* of the Fathers, as if these patristic texts were self-sufficient and self-explanatory. It is indeed the “original sin” of the entire western theological development that it made “texts” the only *loci theologici*, the extrinsic “authorities” of theology, disconnecting theology from its living source: liturgy and spirituality.⁶

The “living sources” of theology give it what Florovsky called “its ‘existential’ character, if we may use this current

² Ibid., 2.

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” *Communio* 24 (1997): 347–396. (This essay was originally published in 1939.) Von Balthasar demolishes the romantic idea of a “return” to some supposedly pristine age in the life of the Church: “No time is completely like another, and the Church is always standing before a new situation, and therefore before a new decision in which she can let herself receive advice and admonition from her past experiences but in which, however, the decision must be faced directly: The past can never lighten, let alone dispense from, the decision itself” (p. 370).

⁵ See “St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers,” *Sobornost* 4 (1961): 165–76.

⁶ Alexander Schmemmann, “Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform,” in *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann*, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 42. This essay was originally published in *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 13 (1969): 217–24.

neologism.... Apart from life in Christ theology carries no conviction and, if separated from the life of faith, theology may degenerate into empty dialectics, a vain polylogia, without any spiritual consequence. Theology ... can never be separated from the life of prayer and from the exercise of virtue.”⁷ Theology, in other words, can never consist solely of, or be entirely satisfied with, abstract treatises quoting various “authorities,” however magisterial.

As Florovsky goes on to argue, “‘to follow’ the Fathers does not mean just ‘to quote’ them. ‘To follow’ the Fathers means to acquire their ‘mind’, their *phronema*.”⁸ The *phronema* of the Fathers, as von Balthasar has put it, was “so marked by the immediacy to experience” in which “the impressions of the world enter so directly.... Greatness, depth, boldness, flexibility, certainty, and a flaming love – these ... are marks of patristic theology.... Life and doctrine are one.”⁹

If this is the operative patristic approach to theology that Radical Orthodoxy wants to draw on, then permit me to suggest that one important early embodiment of this type of theology was Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, who many years ago already saw in such theology a means to assist in the restoration of the communion of the Churches. Sheptytsky was not content to confine himself merely to texts. Perhaps if he had had an exclusively scholarly career, he may have succumbed to this temptation, but Sheptytsky was first and foremost a pastor whose vocation did not allow him to sift theories or write abstract treatises in the privacy of his study. His presence was demanded daily by the Church of which he was chief hierarch. He was a man formed by Tradition but required to respond to the problems of today.

It is no secret that Sheptytsky was a pragmatic person, a pastor, and a civil and canon lawyer.¹⁰ He loved the Church

⁷ Florovsky, “St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers,” also available at http://www.myriobiblos.gr/texts/english/florovski_palamas.html.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” 371.

¹⁰ For more on Sheptytsky’s life, see Cyril Korolevsky, *Metropolitan Andrey (1865–1944)*, trans. Serge Keleher (Lviv: Stauropegion, 1993).