

Towards an Analysis of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky

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Abstract

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Arguably the most penetrating and influential Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century is Georges Florovsky; he posed many of the questions that have captivated the attention of contemporary and subsequent Orthodox theologians. More than any other figure, he voiced the concerns of Orthodoxy to the rest of the Christian world. Though the main outlines of his theological vision have been sketched in a number of works, one searches in vain, in Florovsky's writings, for a fully developed theological system; he is not a systematician but rather responded to questions and issues which arose in particular contexts. The present work assembles materials – chronological, personal, historical and theological – towards an analysis of Florovsky's neo-patristic synthesis. Attention is given to his family background, his time as a teacher of patristics at St. Sergius in Paris, his role in the censure of the theology of Sergei Bulgakov, his ecumenical consciousness, his move to America, role as dean (until his dismissal) at St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary, founding of *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, teaching at Holy Cross Seminary, and increasing involvement with non-Orthodox theologians and the ecumenical movement.



Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed both the tragic suppression of Orthodox church life in traditional territories of the Christian East, and also a remarkable refflorescence of Orthodox thought and theology, catalyzed particularly by the encounter with the West of refugees from the Russian Empire.¹ The effects of both these phenomena are becoming increasingly evident.

On the one hand, Orthodox Churches are vulnerable to the challenges posed by Western Christian denominations and contemporary post-modern cultural crises. This combination has provoked a defensive, negative, and aggressive reaction from the hierarchies of some of the largest and most influential Orthodox jurisdictions, which had endured decades of persecution. On the other hand, Orthodox theology, to a greater degree than ever before in modern history, is dynamically and creatively articulating its positions to Orthodox faithful and to the world at large. The value of this witness is reflected in the

¹The literature on this subject is diverse and scattered. A comprehensive, synthetic treatment of twentieth-century Orthodoxy has yet to be written. For surveys of the trials of specifically Russian Orthodoxy written before the recent opening of Soviet archives, see Jane Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: 1986); Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Regime, 1917–1982* (Crestwood, N.Y.: 1984). A good introduction to the generation of Russian intellectuals and theologians who were at the forefront of the Orthodox theological revival is Nicolas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1963). For a general discussion of Russian émigré life that was the context for creative theological activity, see Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration 1919–1939* (New York, 1990). A treatment of an Orthodox theologian that presents both the broader intra-Orthodox context of his writings and his influence on the Christian West is that of Aidan Nichols, *Theology in the Russian Diaspora: Church Fathers, Eucharist in Nikolai Afanas'ev (1893–1966)* (Cambridge, 1989). See also Alexander Schmemmann, *Russian Theology: 1920–1972, "An Introductory Survey," St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 4 (1972): 79–94; Karl Chr. Felmy, "Die orthodoxe Theologie in kritischer Selbstdarstellung," *KO* 28 (1985): 53–79; and idem, *Die orthodoxe Theologie der Gegenwart: Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt, 1990). For a survey of Greek theology in the twentieth century, see Yannis Spiteris, *La teologia ortodossa neo-greca* (Bologna, 1992).

increasing attention of the Catholic Church to the theological and spiritual legacy of the Christian East.² Now in the third Christian millennium, Orthodox theology has entered quite fully into dialogue with the Christian West. The convergences in consciousness between East and West that have developed during the last decades can be attributed, to a significant degree, to the influence exercised by Orthodox theology and spirituality on Western religious life.

Numerous personalities representing the Christian East have contributed to the contemporary vitality and compelling articulation of Orthodox theology. Arguably the most penetrating and influential Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century is Georges Vasilievich Florovsky (1893–1979), who posed many of the questions that have captivated the attention of contemporary and subsequent Orthodox theologians. More than any other figure, he voiced the concerns of Orthodoxy to the rest of the Christian world. An intellectual of imposing stature, a “scholar’s scholar” as he was considered by many, Florovsky commanded broad respect and admiration, if not affection, within and without the Orthodox community. He was at ease in the company of theologians, philosophers, historians, and literary scholars, especially non-Orthodox. During a long career, the post-revolutionary Russian émigré from Odessa taught and thought in many of the key intellectual centres of Europe and the United States, rising to the pinnacles of both the academic and ecumenical worlds. And yet, one hundred years after his birth and a decade and a half after his death, there is relatively little literature on his writings and thought – at least as compared with the attention that a comparable Western author might receive.³

²For the most recent official Catholic appreciation of the Eastern theological and spiritual heritage, see the apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II, “Orientale lumen,” *Origins* 25, no. 1 (May 18, 1995): 1–13.

³For a bibliography of literature on Florovsky, see Christoph Künkel, *Totus Christus: die Theologie Georges V. Florovskys* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1991) (*Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie*, 62): 448–50. This bibliography of only thirty-three positions includes numerous short articles and brief necrologies but only one book-length monograph: Yves-Noël Lelouvier, *Perspectives russes sur l’Église. Un théologien contemporain: Georges Florovsky* (Paris, 1968)