

TRDL7061: Modern Orthodox Theologians

1: General introduction

The topic of this course is modern Orthodox theology, which we will study in the form of primary theological documents that were written by key figures within the Byzantine Orthodox tradition, chiefly during the course of the Twentieth Century. Any limitation of this sort is inevitably somewhat arbitrary. There are many significant events in the history of Byzantine Orthodox theology from the late mediaeval and/or early modern periods from which 'modern' Orthodoxy could defensibly be dated. Mention can be made of the fall of Constantinople to the Turkish forces of Sultan Mehmed II (1453); the conformation of Russian liturgical practices to Greek standards by Nikon, patriarch of Moscow, and the resulting schism of 'Old Believers' or the *raskol* (1666-7); the social reforms instituted by Tsar Peter the Great, which impacted upon ecclesiastical structure and seminary education no less than on industry and commerce (c. 1696-1725); the publication in Venice of a major collection of ascetic texts, the *Philokalia*, which prompted a renewal of the monastic impulse within Orthodox theology (1782); or even the Russian revolution, which terminated an Orthodox empire that saw itself as the lineal successor of Constantine's Christian Roman Empire (1917). These events were all watersheds within the cultural homelands of Orthodox Christianity and as such they could not but influence the theological climate of Orthodoxy. Serious arguments could be made for dating the beginnings of modern Orthodox theology to any one of them. Even so, there are two good reasons that it is appropriate for us to focus our study upon the Byzantine Orthodox tradition as expressed in near-contemporary writings. The first reason concerns Byzantine Orthodoxy; the second, the Twentieth Century (or, in one instance, the late Nineteenth Century).

First, theologians who belong to many different Orthodox traditions – e.g. the Armenian, the Byzantine, the Coptic, the Indian – have undoubtedly made recent contributions to such fields as ecclesiology, ecumenical theology, moral theology and systematic theology. Orthodox theology is manifestly *not* the preserve of the inheritors of Byzantine culture. However, it is the case that most of the Orthodox theological writings that are readily available in English come from the Byzantine tradition. Furthermore, the Byzantine tradition is actually quite broad based: successors of the Byzantine tradition are found in Greece and Cyprus of course, and in the vestigial Greek communities in Turkey, but also in the modern-day areas that were historically part of the 'Byzantine commonwealth,' such as Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and Serbia; not to mention regions bordering the Byzantine commonwealth, into which Byzantine Christianity spread, with the result that there are indigenous Byzantine Orthodox populations in Finland and Poland (despite their sometimes strained relationships with Russia) and in several Arab countries. All of this is to say nothing of the populations of Christians in the Byzantine Orthodox tradition that have become established through Africa, Australia, North and South America, and

Japan, to name but a few places, as a result of emigration and mission. Within the Byzantine tradition, there is a great deal of diversity.

But, importantly, throughout this diversity we can reasonably assume doctrinal consensus. For what distinguishes the Byzantine Orthodox theological tradition from the others is adherence to a specifiable course of doctrinal developments and definitions. Consider iconography. In the Eighth and Ninth Centuries, iconography became the subject of fierce cultural and theological debates in and around Constantinople. But that was unusual. Amongst the Copts and Ethiopians, for example, the production and veneration of religious artwork was never disrupted in this way. As a result of these controversies in the Byzantine Orthodox tradition, iconography was restored on the basis of articulate and highly refined theological evaluations – and this, too, sets the Byzantine tradition apart, because those articulate theological positions cannot justifiably be presumed on the part of other Orthodox traditions.

Another example can be taken from the recent past. In fifteenth-century Constantinople and environs, a serious controversy raged over the question of whether it is possible to encounter God physically whilst one prays. What was at stake was the legitimacy of a distinct regimen of praying, known as ‘hesychasm,’ and an entire literature in support of that regimen. Hesychasm was ultimately vindicated, thanks not least to the writings of St Gregory Palamas, later archbishop of Thessalonica. The hesychast controversy is a major episode in the history of Byzantine theology and so Byzantine theology is the natural home to Palamite theology (even if Palamite theology has in very recent years begun to captivate the imaginations of thinkers working in different theological cultures). Despite the fact that some Byzantine Orthodox theologians disagree on points of interpreting Palamite theology, St Gregory Palamas’ writings are for all practical purposes universally accepted as definitive. These two examples illustrate the fact that theologians within the Byzantine tradition share a repertoire of terms, themes and practices. This common repertoire makes it possible – though not always easy! – to evaluate Byzantine Orthodox theologians against a common set of practices and beliefs.

Second, several important social and cultural transformations occurred, or came to fruition, during the Twentieth Century. For example, beginning in the late Nineteenth Century traditionally Orthodox societies are reconstituted into modern nation states such as Romania and Greece. Of equal importance is the fact that, in the early Twentieth Century, the last major Orthodox empire collapsed with the fall of the Romanov dynasty in Russia. The consequences of the Russian Revolution would, of course, be felt keenly throughout Eastern Europe and as a result huge numbers of Orthodox Christians were displaced from their native (if not ancestral) homelands. The so-called ‘Diaspora’ of Eastern European Orthodox dates to this period. Massive

social upheavals during the Twentieth Century also resulted in a marked shift in the complexion of Orthodox theology: for the first time, the theological presence of Orthodox monks is overshadowed by the sheer volume of publications by secular Orthodox theologians. The period is in many ways chaotic, but many Orthodox theologians responded to these changes in a profoundly creative way. The sources for this course are representative of that creativity.

One of the major catalysts of modern Orthodox theology has been the shock experienced by theologians whose religious identity was traditionally characterised by a weighty sense of timelessness but whose connection with the past had been dramatically disrupted. Across a range of topics, we will have the opportunity to study the ways in which modern Orthodox theologians have drawn on their heritage to respond to questions posed by, or to present themselves to, forms of Christianity that are strangely familiar but markedly different from their own. It would be misrepresentative, however, to suggest that Orthodox theology has been passive and merely responded to events that have overtaken it. That might arguably have been the case for Orthodox theologians in the late Byzantine period (who were sometimes obliged to facilitate reconciliation with the Catholic Church) or in the early modern periods (who frequently played Catholics and Protestants off against each other, but often lost their own sense of identity in the process).

But what is increasingly clear about Orthodox theology through the Twentieth Century is that it finds its own style and manner of expression. Frequently, the themes that are expressed in this particular style are foreign or unfamiliar to those whose theological background is culturally western. As a result, a survey of Orthodoxy can be sometimes surprising and sometimes frustrating: surprising because an Orthodox perspective can reveal new aspects of familiar themes; frustrating because its presuppositions and preoccupations are often deeply rooted in a cultural history that is only accessible to the modern Westerner with difficulty. The writings that follow have been selected for study precisely because they exemplify the styles of modern Orthodox theology and illustrate the following six major themes: the *Filioque*; Divine Energies; universalism; the neo-patristic synthesis; liturgy; Orthodoxy in the late modern West. Two samples have been chosen to represent each of these six themes characteristic of modern Orthodoxy, for a total of twelve readings.

Various styles of modern Orthodox theology will become apparent in the selected passages, as they reveal the voices and typical concerns of some major Orthodox theologians from the period under study. Familiarity with major Orthodox theologians is basic to appreciating modern Orthodox theology: particular 'buzzwords' that have entered the general conversation are best understood from the context of the modern theologians whose writings gave them currency (or whose writings are summarized by the words, even if the theologians themselves did not

use them). For example, we frequently hear the phrase ‘pseudomorphosis of Orthodox theology’ used to describe – and, generally, to disparage – developments that have resulted when the Orthodox have internalised ideas taken typically from the Christian West. ‘Pseudomorphosis’ is a key theme in the writings of Fr Georges Florovsky, in which he promoted a return to the Hellenic Christian sources of Orthodoxy and a turn away from the philosophical influence of German idealism; in other words, in which Florovsky promoted the *neo-patristic synthesis*. The *neo-patristic synthesis* has been the characteristic form of ‘returning to the sources’ for the Orthodox since the last century. Another keyword that we will encounter in this course is *sobornost* (or, as abstraction, ‘sobornicity’), which is more or less equivalent in meaning to ‘conciliar’ (or, respectively, ‘conciliarity’), though naturally the concept has been coloured by the social history of Eastern Europe. The word would seem to have originated in Slavic translations of the article from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed where belief is confessed in ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’. That origin already suggests that the word serves the Orthodox as a vehicle for expressing ideas about the sort of unity that the Church ideally exemplifies (and it also suggests that those ideas are consciously expressed as an alternative to western notions of catholicity, not to mention Catholicism). *Sobornost* is an ideal that is felt in the ecclesiology of Khomiakov, as we shall see in his ‘The Church is one,’ Bulgakov dedicates some time to explaining it in his ‘The Orthodox Church’ and Stăniloae’s ‘The Holy Spirit and the Sobornicity of the Church’ expresses it quite clearly.

Orthodoxy is sometimes crudely posed as a self-conscious alternative to Western Christianity, or more subtly as a catalyst to bring Western Christianity back to its own authentic tradition. Certainly it is not the case that all of the theologians studied here subscribe to that agenda, but engagement of some sort with the Christian West is typical of all of the theologians whom we will study in this course. A.S. Khomiakov corresponded with William Palmer, an Oxonian, about ecclesiology; Pavel Florensky dedicated an appendix in his *Pillar and Ground of Truth* to Pascal’s ‘Amulet’ and another to solving a logical conundrum posed by Charles Dodgson (better known as Lewis Carroll, the penname under which he authored *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*). Sergei Bulgakov and Vladimir Lossky taught in Paris, as did Georges Florovsky before he moved to the United States. John Meyendorff and Alexander Schmemmann were educated in France and taught in the United States. Dumitru Stăniloae studied in Paris for a time and occasionally delivered lectures, in French, to audiences in the UK. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel was herself French.¹ John

¹ It will be noted that Mme Behr-Sigel is the only female Orthodox theologian to be studied in this course. This is a regrettably accurate reflection of the level of women’s participation in Orthodox theological discussions: Orthodox women have become scholars and saints over the last century, but Behr-Sigel is one of the precious few theologians. The situation is probably attributable, at least in part, to the fact that the traditional locus for Orthodox theological education is the seminary (rather than the university). It is to be hoped that women will increasingly play a visible role in Orthodox

Romanides, born in Greece, accompanied his family as a newborn to the United States, where he grew up and was educated, before returning to Greece to complete his studies and teach. Philip Sherrard was an Englishman who taught Modern Greek literature in London before decamping to the Greek islands, and John Zizioulas, who is Greek, was Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Glasgow and visiting professor in King's College London. Additional information about the theologians whose works will be read will be provided in the following pages, as an aid to understanding and to evaluating critically their theological writings. Writings by these people – along with others that we will not have the occasion to study closely in this course (e.g. Afanasiev, Arseniev, Berdiaev, Clément, Kontoglou, Mantzaridis, Yannaras...) – exercise considerable influence within contemporary Byzantine Orthodox Christianity in the West and presumably will continue to do so as Orthodoxy is increasingly integrated into Western Christian theological conversations.

theology in the future, that Orthodox theological education will promote such a development, and indeed that Orthodox theological education will flourish in university settings.

