

TRDL7061 Modern Orthodox Theologians  
*Encountering God: The Divine energies:*  
*John Meyendorff and Pavel Florensky*

The publication in 1782 of the *Philokalia* has already been mentioned as one meaningful point at which modern Orthodox theology can be said to have begun. One major theologian whose works are transmitted in that anthology, and whose name has already been mentioned several times in this module, is St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), archbishop of Thessalonica and advocate of monastic hesychasm. The cultivation of hesychasm (from the Greek word for 'stillness') is a central theme in authors represented in the *Philokalia* and since Palamas is arguably the pre-eminent theologian of the hesychast movement, he has become so to speak the patron saint of modern Orthodox theology in the eyes of many contemporary Orthodox. A key theme in Palamas's advocacy of the hesychast monks was his insistence that they were right to claim that they came into direct, physical contact with God when they prayed. Palamas' account of how this could be possible turns on the distinction between God's being (or essence: *ousia*) and God's energies (or activities: *energeiai*). (This distinction was already well established by Palamas' time, though whether it meant the same thing for Basil the Great (e.g.) as it meant for Palamas is a question that has been sharply debated from Palamas' day to now.) At the risk of oversimplification, what Palamas asserted was that God's activities manifest God's essence in such a way that the experience of God's activities is the experience of God.

During his lifetime, Palamas was attacked by at least three distinct waves of criticism: first, by Barlaam the Calabrian; then, by Gregory Akindynos; finally, by Nicephorus Gregoras. He was ultimately vindicated by a series of councils who were sympathetic to hesychasm and was proclaimed a saint in 1368, but this was less than a century before the fall of Constantinople to the Seljuk Turks. Monastic practice continued to be very important after the fall of the empire, but theological discussion of Palamas was muted by events, until he was 'rediscovered' in the Twentieth Century. Again, Palamas' theology became controversial. Contemporary theologians such as Martin Jugie, Dorothea Wendebourg and Juan Nadal Cañellas have all subjected his theological writings to great scrutiny and claimed that they are seriously wanting. In response, a virtual industry of Orthodox theology has emerged and re-asserted the importance of Palamas' 'energies-essence distinction' together with the basic claim about real contact with God which that distinction is meant to safeguard.

John (or Jean) Meyendorff, born in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France (17 Feb. 1926) to emigrant parents, was an eminent scholar of the writings and theology of Gregory Palamas. He was educated in Paris, both at St. Serge and at the Sorbonne, by which

institution he was awarded the degree *Doctor-ès-Lettres* (in 1958) for his critical edition with French translation of Palamas' *Triads in defence of the holy Hesychasts*, which was published a year later, along with a popular presentation of Palamas and a scholarly monograph on Palamas. The latter, his *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (the title of the English translation, published in 1964), remains the standard introduction to Palamas for English speakers. Meyendorff taught briefly at St. Serge before being recruited to St Vladimir's Seminary in 1959, as Professor of Church History and Patristics. He held joint appointments at Dumbarton Oaks (a major research centre for Byzantine Studies, under the aegis of Harvard University) and Fordham University, where he was Professor of Byzantine History. He was also an adjunct professor in Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary. Meyendorff was installed as Dean of St Vladimir's in 1984, succeeding both Georges Florovsky and Alexander Schmemmann in that role. His academic work was recognised through many prestigious awards. These include a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a Guggenheim Fellowship, as well as honorary doctorates from General Theological Seminary and the University of Notre Dame; he was also a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and, in 1991, Patriarch Aleksy of Moscow awarded him the Order of St Vladimir, 2nd Class. In June 1992, Meyendorff retired as Dean of St Vladimir's and the following month (22 July 1992) he died.

Meyendorff's work on Palamas can be seen as implementing Georges Florovsky's call for a return to Christian Hellenism. His scholarly publications, while not beyond reproach, are characterised by meticulous research and an exacting study of the sources; the fruits of his scholarship were also made available to a wider readership through numerous popular publications on a wide array of subjects. The excerpt given below is taken from his major work in historical theology, *Byzantine Theology*. In 'Monastic Theology,' Meyendorff sketches the course of monastic contributions to Orthodox Christology. This account culminates in a presentation of Palamite theology, with its characteristic distinction of essence and energies, and can therefore be profitably read as a history of the development of Orthodox theology from a Palamite perspective.

A rather different redeployment of themes familiar from Palamas' theology is found in our second reading, which is taken from Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky's monumental *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*. Florensky (21 Jan. 1882 – ? Dec. 1937) was a polymath who, in addition to his theological work, made substantial contributions to philosophical logic, art theory, mathematics and electrodynamics. After studying mathematics at Moscow State University, he went to study theology at Sergey Posad in 1904. During his time as a theological student, Florensky wrote his massive *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, which was completed by 1908 but only published in 1924. Around this time, he read the works of Solovyev. Florensky was interested in the literary features of Solovyev's writings no less than their theological content: along

with Andrei Biely (whose father had taught Florensky mathematics), he became one of the chief figures in the Symbolist movement in Russian literature.

Florensky taught philosophy at the Theological Academy in Sergey Posad after graduation and lived nearby in the Troitse-Sergiyeva Lavra. He was ordained priest in 1911, and served in the church at Sergey Posad until the Bolshevik authorities closed down the Lavra (in 1918) and the church (in 1921). Florensky then took up work in applied science, working on the State Plan for the Electrification of Russia, and over the next several years published many works in pure science in addition to his studies in art history. All the while, however, Florensky maintained his public profile as an Orthodox priest.

Florensky was exiled in 1928, but recalled to Moscow. In 1933, he was sentenced to a decade in the labour camps. He was moved to Solovki, an ancient island monastery turned gulag, from 1934 to 1937, when he was transferred again – this time, to Leningrad (St Petersburg). There he was sentenced to execution and, though official records give the date of his execution as 8 Dec. 1943, it seems instead that he was shot shortly after sentence was handed down in December 1937.

Florensky's major work is *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*. In it, his wide-ranging interests are synthesised into an innovative theological statement. For example, Florensky's aesthetic and literary commitments are embedded in the very language and style in which he casted the book (as Richard Gustafson notes in his introductory remarks to the English translation). The book is written in the form of twelve letters to an anonymous 'brother' or 'friend', generally understood to be Christ. Throughout the book, Florensky explores the meanings of love in Christian context – something particularly clear in the excerpt given below. He builds up his account of the 'spiritual light' without explicit reference to Palamite theology (although there is a noteworthy excursus on 'collections of ascetic writings', or 'philokalias', which inevitably recalls the writings of Palamas), but the stock of imagery that Florensky uses indicates clearly enough that his topic is the same as Palamas's. Whether or to what extent Florensky's religious philosophy and Meyendorff's Neo-Palamite theology coincide, however, is an open question.

*John Meyendorff*

Source:

'Monastic Theology,' in *Byzantine Theology*, New York, NY: Fordham Press, 1973: 66-78.

Other major works:

*Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1975.

*Grégoire Palamas. Défense des saints hesychastes: Introduction, text critique, traduction, et notes*, Louvain: Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense, 1959.

*Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church 450-680 AD*, Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1989.

*Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World*, Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1978.

*St Grégoire Palamas et la mystique orthodoxe*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959.

*A Study of Gregory Palamas*, London: Faith Press, 1964; English translation, by George Lawrence, of *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959.

Secondary literature:

Charanis, P. 'Review: *Introduction à l'Étude de Grégoire Palamas* by Jean Meyendorff; *Grégoire Palamas: Défense des saints hésychastes* by Jean Meyendorff,' *Speculum* 36 (1961): 153-155.

Nassif, B., ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

Romanides, J., 'Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 6 (1960/1961): 186-205; 9 (1963/1964): 225-270.

*Pavel Florensky*

Source:

'Letter Four: The Light of the Truth,' in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997: 53-79.

Other major writings:

*Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, edited by Nicoletta Misler and translated by Wendy Salmond, London: Reaktion Books, 2002.

*Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev, Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1996.

*Salt of the Earth: An Encounter with a Holy Russian Elder: Isidore of Gethsemane Hermitage*, trans. Richard Betts, Platina, CA: St Herman Press, 1988.

Secondary literature:

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Meerson, M.A., *The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology*, Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998: 117-136.

Slisenski, R., *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love*, Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1984.