

TRDL7061 Modern Orthodox Theologians
Reclaiming the Patristic legacy: The Neo-Patristic synthesis:
Georges Florovsky and John Romanides

As the previous units have already shown clearly, recourse to the past is a major feature of Orthodox theology. The Orthodox glory in their fidelity to the heritage from the Fathers of the church; the attitude is expressed neatly in an epigram taken from the modern literary critic, Zissimos Lorenzatos (1915-2004), who paradoxically claimed that originality means remaining 'faithful to the originals, the eternal archetypes'. Precisely how such fidelity is to be maintained, however, is by no means self-evident. It is beyond doubt that this sentiment can be invoked simply to defend unthinking habits, conservative politics or even retrograde theology, in which case faithfulness to the originals is manifested in a refusal to engage with one's contemporaries. So much for one rather troublesome possibility; it is also beyond doubt that this sentiment can motivate serious attention to the problems of how we moderns relate to the Christian heritage in a historically responsible manner. In the second half of the Twentieth Century especially, a tremendous amount of energy was dedicated to thinking through those problems with particular reference to the theology of the Church Fathers and its meaning in the modern world. That outpouring of energy is closely associated with the 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis' in general and with Fr Georges Florovsky in particular. This unit will focus on Florovsky and on Fr John Romanides, whose writings exemplify some of the key strategies used within the 'Synthesis' to identify their line of intellectual descent.

Georges Vasilievich Florovsky (28 Aug. 1893 – 11 Aug. 1979) was a Russian Orthodox priest and theologian who pursued his academic career outside of Russia – first in Sofia, then in Prague, next in Paris, and finally in several cities in the United States (New York City; Cambridge, MA; Princeton, NJ). He was heavily involved in the formation and subsequent work of the World Council of Churches, but he is best known amongst Orthodox Christians for his seminal contributions to the 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis'. His call for a creative appropriation of historical Christian belief was worked out through the process of critically studying the history of Russian theology, which resulted in his massive *Ways of Russian Theology*. What he discovered through that process was a breach between theology and the ecclesiastical experience of prayer, which resulted in a rupture between intellect and instinct. The experience of this rupture was felt by many intelligent and devout people, but most of the responses served only to compound the problem – whether by introducing into Russian Orthodoxy alien habits of thought and so generating 'pseudomorphoses', or through cultivating false nostalgia that contributes to sectarianism, or even encouraging what he once called 'an exodus from history' through breaking from the traditional Byzantine Greek heritage of Russian Orthodoxy. By deliberate contrast, Florovsky's response to the crisis of modern life is based on a conscientious entry into the historical experience of Christianity in all its

specificity, which includes first and foremost the experience of Christian worship. (Significantly, Florovsky regarded the liturgical books of the Church as the first theological texts he read.) Because he identified the breach between theology and prayer as the underlying cause of these problems, his strategy for a viable contemporary theology was through an integration of worship and understanding in the classical Byzantine mode with all that it implies in terms of self-discipline, charity and ascetic humility.

Florovsky strongly denied that the Neo-Patristic Synthesis justifies retrograde nationalism, mechanical repetitiveness or saccharine nostalgia. To the contrary, according to Florovsky, it

should be more than just a collection of Patristic sayings or statements. It must be a *synthesis*, a creative reassessment of those insights which were granted to the Holy Men of old. It must be *Patristic*, faithful to the spirit and vision of the Fathers, *ad mentem Patrum*. Yet, it must also be *Neo-Patristic*, since it is to be addressed to the new age, with its own problems and queries (quoted in Andrew Blane's *Georges Florovsky*, at p. 154).

The synthesis thus conceived is necessarily a dynamic engagement with the modern world – including, as we see from the selected reading, with modern philosophy of history. Florovsky's vision of theology is broad and generous enough (and his understanding of the history of Orthodox theology is critical enough) to enable him to take very seriously the proposition that the Orthodox can and should learn from other Christians. And his vision of Orthodox theology also incorporates a call for seriousness, even professionalism, with respect to the historical sources.

John S. Romanides was born in Greece (1927) and taught there for many years, though he grew up and received his basic education in the United States, before returning to Greece for doctoral study in the University of Athens in 1955. He courted controversy frequently in his career, beginning in 1957 with a sustained debate with Panagiotis Trembelas (1886-1977) about the nature and sources of theology. Though he was supported in some quarters, Romanides was out of step with the dominant trends in Greek academic theology and eventually he returned to the States, taking up a post at Holy Cross Orthodox School of Theology in 1965. He returned to Greece – this time, to a professorship in dogmatic theology in the University of Thessalonica – in 1970, from which he retired in 1984. He remained active in ecumenical work, especially with the Oriental Orthodox ('Non-Chalcedonian') Churches, and teaching for the Institute of Theology in the University of Balamand, Lebanon. Romanides died in 2001.

Romanides' contributions to modern Orthodox theology are identifiable in two major areas. First, he employed medical imagery to describe Orthodox theology as a mode of promoting health holistically – and, conversely, to describe sin as a form of

disease. As he put it in the arresting title of a publication in Greek, 'Religion is a Neurological Sickness, but Orthodoxy is its Cure.' (An English version of this material, along with several other documents by Romanides, has been available for many years and was still available at the time of preparing this unit, at <http://www.romanity.org/>.) Romanides' thesis that Orthodoxy is essentially holistic well-being has been taken up subsequently by Hierotheos Vlachos (b. 1945), Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, in several books with a strong pastoral emphasis. Prime examples include *Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers* (Levadia, Greece: Holy Monastery of the Birth of the Theotokos Press, 1994) and *The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition* (Levadia, Greece: Holy Monastery of the Birth of the Theotokos Press, 1993).

The second major area to which Romanides has contributed is the historical study of theology. Here, his writings on 'Romanity' are key. Romanides pursued a revisionist account (most of the elements of which are familiar to students of the early medieval period) that sought to explain the fracture of Christianity – or, more provocatively, the separation of the Roman Church from Orthodoxy – in terms of the incursion of Franks into Roman society and the Church of Rome. In an incisive overview of Romanides' work that is available only in Italian, Yannis Spiteris has described the constellation of assertions in Romanides' writings as 'a strange mix of politico-historico-religious thought in which political utopia, conceived as a Roman Byzantine foundation from the times of Justinianic universalism, goes step by step with Palamite spirituality.' These are strong words in response to a strongly worded thesis. But Spiteris is surely right to identify the combination of political, historical and theological themes in Romanides' vast synthesis, to comment on the emphasis that Romanides places on the theological spirituality of Gregory Palamas (about whom, more in the next unit) and to see all of this exemplified for Romanides in the reign of Emperor Justinian.

In the selection from Romanides that follows, we see these two major themes intertwined. What needs to be emphasised here is that Romanides is offering a theologically informed, or even theologically driven, account of the past. The very fact that he does not pretend to be non-partisan makes his recourse to the Fathers of the Church particularly interesting: for example, it invites us to think about the criteria for identifying *who* are Fathers of the Church precisely because it rigorously excludes some figures from being identified in that way. Again, Romanides' distinctive emphasis on Orthodoxy as a modality of health (with heavy use of psychotherapeutic themes) indicates that he was interested in retrieving from the past insights that would be useful in consideration of what Florovsky called the 'problems and queries' of this age.

Georges Florovsky

Source:

'The predicament of the Christian Historian,' in *The Collected Works, Vol. II: Christianity and Culture*, ed. R.S. Haugh, Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1974: 31-65

Other major works:

The Collected Works, ed. R.S. Haugh, vols. 1-5, Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972-1979; and vols. 6-14, Vaduz, Lichtenstein: Büchvertriebsanstalt, 1987-1989.

Secondary literature:

Blane, A., ed. *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual, Orthodox Churchman*, Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1993.

Klimoff, A., 'Georges Florovsky and the Sophiological controversy' *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49 (2005): 67-100.

Mascall, E.L., and Williams, R., 'George Florovsky (1893-1979),' *Sobornost* 2 (1980): 69-72.

Williams, G.H., 'Georges Vasilievich Florovsky: His American Career (1948-1965),' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 11 (1965): 7-107.

John S. Romanides

Source:

'Speculative versus Empirical Theology,' in *Franks, Romans, Feudalism, and Doctrine: An Interplay Between Theology and Society*, Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1981: 37-59.

Other major works:

The Ancestral Sin, trans. Gabriel, G., Ridgwood, NJ: Zephyr Publications, 2002.

An Outline of Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics, trans. Dragas, G., Rollinsford, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2004.

Secondary literature:

de Halleux, A., 'Une vision orthodoxe grecque de la romanité,' *Revue théologie de Louvain* 15 (1984): 54-66

Sopko, A., *Prophet of Roman Orthodoxy: The Theology of John Romanides*, Dewdney, BC: Synaxis Press, 1998.

Spiteris, Y., 'Ioannis Romanidis,' in *La teologia ortodossa neo-greca*, Bologna: EDB, 1992: 281-295.