

TRDL7061 Modern Orthodox Theologians

Orthodoxy in the late modern West: Theology and contemporary issues:

Philip Sherrard and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel

As noted previously, all of the theologians studied in this module have been connected in one way or another with the Western Christian world. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the defining features of modern Orthodox theology is the level and intensity of interaction with Western theology. Most of what we have seen so far is evidence for Orthodox theologians looking back to their own tradition in changed circumstances and expressing their views, beliefs and values in a foreign idiom. Giving so much attention to that function in modern Orthodox theology is accurately representative of the state of Orthodoxy. But it should not escape our attention that there is also within modern Orthodoxy a population who are culturally Westerners who work within the confluence of Byzantine and Western cultures. The final unit of this module focuses on contributions to Orthodox theology in Western Europe made by two converts to Orthodox Christianity (Philip Sherrard and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel) with reference to public issues that are especially salient in the West: environmentalism and the place of women in the Church, respectively.

Philip Sherrard (23 September 1922 – 30 May 1995) was a noted scholar and translator of Modern Greek literature, especially poetry, in addition to being a poet in his own right. His writings include studies of Greek poetry, church history and what might broadly (and not entirely satisfactorily) be called 'spirituality'. What remains consistent across his four decades or more as an author is Sherrard's Christian criticism of culture. Criticism here refers not to an unduly negative evaluation – though that, too, can be found in Sherrard's pages, particularly when the bogey of Roman Catholic Christianity is in view – but to a thorough-going, informed and probative interaction with the object being criticised. In this sense, Sherrard was above all critical of modern understandings of the world and of religion's place in the world. He identified the mechanisation of society and the uncritical acceptance of technology as a severance of people from their environment, with disastrous consequences. Sherrard's historiography (as found in *Greek East and Latin West* and *Church, Papacy and Schism*) is essentially an attempt to explain the origins and the character of that process. Similarly, his ecological writings (an outtake from one of which is the reading for this section) are essentially an attempt to re-integrate the fragmented pieces of an authentic worldview.

In terms of his Orthodox historiography, Sherrard can be compared to Romanides, because both of them are deeply receptive of the traditional – and, it must be noted, polemical – narrative of the decline of the West that had been refined in centuries of Greek Byzantine literature. But whereas Romanides applied his theological research to the question of the health and wholeness of the person, Sherrard worked on a much broader canvas: his environmentalism was nothing less than cosmic in its

scope. In three of his later publications, Sherrard insisted on the importance of re-discovering the spiritual reality that causes the beauty of the natural world. Comparison to another modern Orthodox thinker may be appropriate here. For Sherrard, like Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), described this in rich and emotive prose that owed much of its symbolism to an exceptionally eclectic reading, especially of works that fall well beyond the canon of Orthodox theology.

His eclecticism, viewed positively, indicates that the lost sense of the universe as sacred whole that prevails in the modern West is anomalous with respect to the history of human culture at large. Sherrard proposes Orthodox Christianity as offering an integrated cosmological vision that is sufficient to redress the environmental crisis, precisely because that crisis (as he argues) stems from a defective worldview. These defects are identifiable precisely by comparing modern Western culture to Orthodox culture, the resources of which can be used to correct the problems endemic to life in a post-industrialised society. He does not restrict himself to the glories of the Byzantine tradition, but rather indicates that the lost awareness he is keen to restore has been known round the world and down the centuries, and continues to resonate in world literature. For Sherrard, this awareness cannot be reduced to a simple attitude or notional assent to some abstract ideas. Instead, it is realised in one's manner of living. It is perhaps here that we can see clearly the influence on his thinking of the *Philokalia*, which (with G. E. H. Palmer and Kallistos Ware, and a team of others) he helped to translate for over twenty years. Theology is a way of life. Sherrard put his principals into practice by living simply in a remote part of the Greek island of Evia, where for example he used traditional techniques to build a small chapel by hand, where he is buried.

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, the 'Grandmother of Western Orthodoxy', was born in Schiltigheim, Alsace (21 July 1907) to a Lutheran father and a Jewish mother. She trained in philosophy at Strasbourg and in theology in the Protestant Faculty in Paris; in 1930 she was authorized by the Reformed Church of Alsace-Lorraine for preaching and ministry, thus becoming the first female pastor in that church. This ministry was short-lived, however, as she converted to orthodox Christianity in 1931. Behr-Sigel lived in Nancy during the Second World War and during this time became involved in resistance activities, such as sheltering Jews and aiding their escape. These activities were jointly supported by people of many faith, and Behr-Sigel would look back on this period as her introduction to ecumenism.

After the War, Behr-Sigel returned to theological education, this time at St Serge, though as a woman she was only able to follow the 'free courses'. But in time she would teach at St Serge – and indeed in the Institut Catholique de Paris, the Dominican College in Ottawa and elsewhere. She was a popular lecturer and travelled around the world to lecture well into her nineties. (When she died on 26

November 2005, she had recently returned from giving a talk in Oxford about Fr Lev Gillet.)

Behr-Sigel urged that the Orthodox Church should be open to learning from other churches, that Orthodox Christians should endeavour to root their faith in local cultures (not least so that they could meaningfully bear witness to the Gospel in the places where they find themselves), and that Christian division should be recognized as a scandal. In a word, she was committed to Christian ecumenism. One particular area in which she argued that the orthodox should learn from other Christians is in the place and role of women in the Church. She was a tireless advocate of the need to address seriously the problem that women are treated as inferiors within the Orthodox Church. Hence, one of the major topics to which she devoted her writings was the question of the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church. An excerpt from one of her longest works on the subject is the reading for this section. Worthy of attention is Behr-Sigel's identification of a salient public concern and her attempt to respond to it by drawing on Orthodox resources.

Philip Sherrard

Source:

'Notes toward the Restitution of a Sacred cosmology', in *Human Image: World Image. The Death and Resurrection of Sacred Cosmology* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1992), 14-81

Other major works and translations:

The Marble Threshing Floor: Studies in Modern Greek Poetry (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1956)

The Greek East and the Latin West (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

(with E. Keeley) C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975)

Christianity and Eros: Essays on the Theme of Sexual Love (London: S.P.C.K., 1976).

(with G. E. H. Palmer and K. Ware) *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, four volumes (London: Faber and Faber, 1979-1995)

The Rape of Man and Nature (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987)

The Sacred in Life and Art (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1995)

Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

Secondary literature:

Chryssavgis, John, 'Beauty and Sacredness in the Work of Philip Sherrard', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16 (1998), 91-109

Chryssavgis, John, 'Essay Review: A Tribute to Philip Sherrard (1922-1995)', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 14 (1996), 345-354

Lash, Ephrem, 'Review of *Human Image: World Image*', *Sourozh* 51 (1993), 49

Ware, Kallistos, 'Philip Sherrard 1922-95', *Sobornost* 17 (1995), 45-52

Elisabeth Behr-Sigel

Source:

'Women in the Orthodox Church: Heavenly Vision and Historical Reality', in *The Ministry of Women in the Church* (Walthamstead: Anthony Clarke, 1991), 103-47.

Other major works:

An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality, trans. S. Bigham (Torrance, CA: Oakwood, 1992)

Lev Gillet: <<Un moine de l'Église d'Orient>> (Paris: Cerf, 1993)

(with K. Ware) *The Ordination of Women in the Orthodox Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000)

Discerning the Signs of the Time: The Vision of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, eds M. Plekon and S. Hinlicky (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001)

Secondary literature:

Nonna Verna Harrison, 'Orthodox Arguments against the ordination of Women as Priests', *Sobornost* 14 (1992), 6-23 (a response to a position paper by Behr-Sigel, which is followed by Behr-Sigel's rejoinder)

Thomas Hopko, ed., *Women and the Priesthood*, second edition (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1999)