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FROM THE “RETURN TO THE FATHERS” TO THE NEED FOR A MODERN ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

Pantelis Kalaitzidis¹

The “Return to the Fathers”

In the First Orthodox Theological Conference, which was held in Athens in 1936, Fr Georges Florovsky, perhaps the greatest Orthodox theologian of the 20th century and modern Orthodoxy’s most important ecumenical figure (being one of the co-founders of the World Council of Churches, and a distinguished member of and speaker for the Faith and Order Commission), proclaimed Orthodox theology’s need to “return to the Fathers” and to be released from its “Babylonian captivity” to Western theology in terms of its language, its presuppositions, and its thinking.² Indeed, he would often return to this text with his use of the term “pseudomorphosis” to describe the long process of Latinization and Westernization of Russian theology.³ His call was quickly adopted

- 1 A slightly shorter version of this paper was presented at the WOCATI-ETE/WCC International Congress, held at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in Volos, Greece on June 5, 2008. This paper was translated from Modern Greek by Fr Gregory Edwards (except the quotations from the book by P. Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Modernity: An Introduction* [Athens: Indiktos Publications, 2007], tr. Elizabeth Theokritoff).
- 2 The paper was originally presented in German at this conference: cf. G. Florovsky, “Westliche Einflüsse in der russischen Theologie,” in *Procès-Verbaux du Premier Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe à Athènes, 29 novembre–6 décembre 1936*, Ham. S. Alivisatos (ed.) (Athens: Pyrsos, 1939), 212–31; the same text may be found in *Kyrios*, II, nr 1 (Berlin, 1937), 1–22. English translation (by T. Bird and R. Haugh): “Western Influences in Russian Theology” in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 4: *Aspects of Church History* (Vaduz: Bieververtriebsanstalt, 1987), 157–82.
- 3 G. Florovsky, “Western Influences in Russian Theology,” *op cit*, *passim*. Cf. *idem*, *Ways of Russian Theology*, part I, transl. by R. L. Nichols, volume 5 in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1979) and part II, tr. R. L. Nichols

and shared by many theologians of the Russian Diaspora, especially by the émigré theologian Vladimir Lossky, but also by Archimandrite Cyprian Cern, Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, Myra Lot-Borodine, Fr John Meyendorff and others. He also gathered fervent supporters in traditionally Orthodox countries, such as Greece, Serbia, and Romania; the cases of the distinguished Orthodox theologians Fr Dumitru Staniloae (from Romania), Fr Justin Popovic (from Serbia), and the Greek theologians of the generation of the 1960s⁴ are very characteristic. The theological movement of the

vol. 6, in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987). On the origin and use of the term “pseudomorphosis” in the work of Fr Florovsky, see: N. Kazarian, “La notion de *pseudomorphose* chez Oswald Spengler et Georges Florovsky” (unpublished paper presented at the International Conference “Le Père Georges Florovsky et le renouveau de la théologie orthodoxe au 20^e siècle,” St Sergius Institute, Paris, November 27–28, 2009). For a critical approach to Fr Florovsky’s theory of “pseudomorphosis,” cf. Dorothea Wendebourg, “Pseudomorphosis: A Theological Judgement as an Axiom for Research in the History of Church and Theology,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42 (1997): 321–42.

- 4 Among the Greek theologians we ought to note two well-known figures in particular, Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas and Fr John S. Romanides. Both were distinguished disciples of Fr Florovsky and representatives of the “neo-patristic synthesis” and of the “return to the Fathers,” but each took a different path in the contemporary Orthodox theological world. In his writings, Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas (Ecumenical Patriarchate), has tried to articulate a creative version of the “neo-patristic synthesis” which is open to contemporary philosophical thought and to the dialogue between East and West, constantly repeating the necessity of a theological synthesis of Eastern and Western traditions, without which there is no real catholicity for the Church (cf. for instance the “Introduction” to his classic work *Being as Communion* [Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985], especially pp. 25–26). According to some interpreters, Zizioulas, although he remains faithful to the Cappadocian concepts (for example), nevertheless is “thinking with the fathers *beyond* the fathers” (A. Papanikolaou, *Apophaticism v. Ontology: A Study of Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas*, PhD Dissertation [Chicago: The University of Chicago School of Divinity, 1998], 250. Cf. the more temperate analysis of A. Brown, “On the Criticism of *Being as Communion* in Anglophone Orthodox Theology,” in Douglas Knight (ed.), *The Theology of John Zizioulas* [Aldershot, Hants & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007], 52, 66). The Rev Dr John Romanides opened a new path for Greek theology in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s and represented a hopeful example of a “neo-patristic” theologian. In his doctoral dissertation (*The Ancestral Sin*, Athens, 1955 [English tr. by G. S. Gabriel, Zephyr Publ., 2002]), Romanides reproaches Orthodox theology’s stifling confinement to both scholasticism and academism, suggesting as an alternative the healing ethos of Orthodoxy with a thoroughness that

“return to the Fathers” became the hallmark of and the dominant “paradigm” for Orthodox theology for the better part of the 20th century, and for many its primary task, to such a degree that this celebrated “return to the Fathers” and the effort to “de-westernize” Orthodox theology overshadowed all other theological questions, as well as all the challenges the modern world had posed—and continues to pose—to Orthodox theology, while other Orthodox theological trends, such as the Russian school of theology, faded from view. While the emblematic figure of this movement was, without question, Fr Georges Florovsky, we must not ignore or underestimate the decisive contributions of other theologians, such as those mentioned above, in its crystallization—to such a degree, in fact, that many of the positions which ultimately prevailed stand in stark contrast to the known theological sensibilities of Florovsky himself (e.g., “ahead with the Fathers,” the openness of history, etc.), thus attributing even more conservative features to a movement that already by its very nature (“return,” etc.) included such elements.

The 20th century was, therefore, a time of renewal for Orthodox theology, which for the first time in many centuries, due to the influence of the Orthodox Diaspora and the ecumenical dialogue, ventured out from its traditional strongholds and initiated a discussion with other Christian traditions. It thus attempted to move its identity and self-consciousness beyond the dominant academic scholasticism and pietism of the late 19th century by adopting the form of a “neo-patristic synthesis,” the distinctive mark of which

proved his theological acumen. Nevertheless, the appearance of Fr Romanides’ *Romiosyne* (Romanity) in 1975 marked a dramatic turning point in his work, which drifted from theology to cultural criticism, ethno-theology and anti-westernism. From that point, the polarization between a Greek and Latin-speaking “Romanity,” on the one hand, and a “Frankism” on the other, became central to Romanides’ work, as he saw Frankism as endlessly conspiring to exterminate Romanity. The lack of an eschatological perspective combined with a peculiar form of immanentism in Romanides’ corpus (an immanentism entailed in his theological blueprint of “purification, illumination, and theosis”) fits in perfectly with the ascription of a “sacred geography” to Romanity, presented therein as a sacred realm inhabited by the hallowed race of the Romans, the new chosen people who are, exclusively, receptive to salvation.

was the “existential” character of theology,⁵ and the definition of which contrasts repetition or imitation to synthesis, while combining fidelity to tradition with renewal.⁶ But, despite its innovative moments, it seems that the 20th century—precisely because of the way in which this “return to the Fathers” was perceived and of the corresponding program to “de-westernize” Orthodox theology—was also for Orthodox theology a time of introversion, conservatism, and of a static or fundamentalist understanding of the concept of Tradition, which very often came to be equated with traditionalism. Thus, just as some Protestant churches still suffer from a certain level of fundamentalism regarding the Bible or biblical texts, the Orthodox Church, for its part, often finds itself trapped and frozen in a “fundamentalism of tradition” or in a “fundamentalism of the Fathers,” which makes it hard for it to work out in practice its pneumatology and its charismatic dimension. This prevents it from being part of or in dialogue with the modern world, and discourages it from displaying its creative gifts and strengths.

Indeed, the particularly defensive way of understanding Florovsky’s “return to the Fathers” and the systematization of his theory about “Christian Hellenism,” which considers the latter to be “the *eternal category* of Christian existence,”⁷ and “something more than

5 Cf. for example G. Florovsky, “Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church” in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 4: *Aspects of Church History* (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 17. According to Metropolitan John Zizioulas (“Fr Georges Florovsky: The Ecumenical Teacher,” *Synaxis*, issue 64 (1997): 14–15 [in Greek]): “The main goal of theology was, for him (sc. Florovsky), the ‘neo-patristic synthesis,’ which means, as we shall see, a deeper quest for the existential sense of patristic theology and its synthesis, which requires rare creative skills and a gift for synthesis.”

6 Cf., for instance, Fr Florovsky’s “theological testament,” published by A. Blane, *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual, Orthodox Churchman* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1993), 154: “It is by that way that I was led quite early to the idea of what I am calling now ‘the Neo-Patristic Synthesis.’ 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 be also *Neo-Patristic*, since it is to be addressed to the new age, with its own problems and queries.”

7 G. Florovsky, “Ways of Russian Theology,” in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 4: *Aspects of Church History*, 195. Cf. idem, *Ways of Russian Theology*, in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 6, 297.

a passing stage” in the Church,⁸ and which is integrally connected with Hellenism, patristics, and catholicity,⁹ eventually helped consolidate the idea that we needed constantly to take refuge in the Church’s past—and, in this case, the Fathers in particular—so that we could be certain that we were within the limits of the truth. This version of the “return to the Fathers,” moreover, seems never to return to a focus on the future “together with Fathers” (as Florovsky himself advocated in both his writings and his talks), thus rendering Orthodox theology mute and uneasy in the face of the challenges of the modern world. We Orthodox thus seem to be satisfied with the strong sense of tradition that distinguishes us, inasmuch as the Orthodox, more than any other Christian confession, have preserved the wholeness of the theology, spiritual inheritance, and piety of the undivided Church. As a result of this perception, very often the Orthodox world is unable to see another mission and another function for theology today apart from the continual return to its sources and roots, or the repetition and “translation” into modern parlance of the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which the past, guided by the Holy Spirit, has deposited into the treasury of the faith, thus

8 G. Florovsky, “Ways of Russian Theology,” op cit, 195. Cf. Idem, *Ways of Russian Theology*, in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 6, 297.

9 “In a sense the Church itself is Hellenistic, is a Hellenistic formation—in other words, Hellenism is a standing category of Christian existence. [...] let us be more Greek to be truly catholic, to be truly orthodox,” G. Florovsky, “Patristics and Modern Theology,” in *Procès-Verbaux du Premier Congrès de Théologie Orthodoxe à Athènes*, op cit, 241–42. Cf. also his article: “The Christian Hellenism,” *Orthodox Observer*, no. 442 (January 1957): 10: “Let us be more ‘Hellenic’ in order that we may be truly Christian.” An exhaustive analysis and critique of these ideas of Florovsky can be found in my doctoral dissertation: P. Kalaitzidis, *Hellenicity and Anti-westernism in the Greek Theological Generation of the 60’s*, School of Theology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2008, especially pp. 173–205 [in Greek]. Cf. idem, “L’hellénisme chrétien du Père Georges Florovsky et les théologiens grecs de la génération de ’60” (unpublished paper presented at the International Conference: “Le Père Georges Florovsky et le renouveau de la théologie orthodoxe au 20e siècle,” St Sergius Institute, Paris, November 27–28, 2009). Cf. also, M. Stokoe, *Christian Hellenism*, thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Divinity (St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, April 17, 1981), according to whom “Christian Hellenism” could be considered a model of contextual theology responding to the needs and expectations of every age and society.

creating a peculiar kind of Monophysitism. The latter leads to the depreciation, obsolescence, and even elimination of human reason, inasmuch as it believes that there is nothing more to say, since the Fathers have said everything that needs to be said once and for all, and since patristic theology contains the solution to every problem in the past, present, and future. Yet, human reason, like all of human nature, was fully assumed by the hypostasis of God the Word in the Incarnation, and was fully deified during the Ascension of the Lord, when he ascended to the right hand of the Father.

It is true, as we already noted above, that Florovsky always emphasized that the “return to the Fathers” did not mean the repetition or imitation of the past, confined to its various forms, or an escape from history, a denial of the present and history. On the contrary, what he continually stressed and highlighted was a creative return and meeting with the spirit of the Fathers, the acquisition of the mind of the Fathers (*ad mentem patrum*), and the creative fulfillment of the future.¹⁰ In the words of Fr Georges Florovsky himself, in a meaningful extract from the last chapter of his classic work, *Ways of Russian Theology*:

Orthodox theology can recover its independence from western influence only through a spiritual return to its patristic sources and foundations. Returning to the fathers, however, does not mean abandoning the present age, escaping from history, or quitting the field of battle. Patristic experience must not only be preserved, but it must be discovered and brought into life. Independence from the non-Orthodox West need not become estrangement from it. A break with the West would provide no real liberation. Orthodox thought must perceive and suffer the western trials and temptations, and, for its own sake, it cannot afford to avoid and keep silent over them. [...] The future is more truly and profoundly revealed when seen as an obligation rather as an expecta-

10 Cf. for instance, G. Florovsky “Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 4: *Aspects of Church History*, op cit, 18, 20–22, *ibid.* “Western Influences in Russian Theology,” 180–82, *ibid.* “The Ways of Russian Theology,” 208–209.

tion and premonition. The future is not merely something exacted or awaited—it is something created. The Christian calling inspires us exactly with the responsibility of duty [...] Orthodoxy is not only a tradition, it is a task [...]. And genuine historical synthesis lies not in interpreting the past, but in creatively fulfilling the future.¹¹

Florovsky’s insistence, however, on the timelessness and eternalness of Christian Hellenism, i.e., in the necessity of Greek categories of thought for the formulation and expression of the eternal truth of the Gospel in every time and place, as well as his refusal to examine—along with “back to the Fathers” and “ahead with the Fathers”—even the possibility of “beyond the Fathers,” largely negates his theology’s openness and orientation to the future. Florovsky could understand the “return to the Fathers” in terms of creativity and renewal; he could also passionately proclaim “ahead with the Fathers”; however, what ultimately seems to prevail in his work, primarily in how it was understood and interpreted by his followers, is the element of “return.” The call to “return to the Fathers” did not simply offer an identity and a character with which Orthodox theologians could move through the terrible upheavals of the 20th century and survive spiritually and intellectually.¹² He provided an easily digestible slogan and a sense of security and warmth amid a collapsing Christendom.

We should note here that the movement to “return to the Fathers” is not a unique phenomenon that has taken place only among the Orthodox. As I demonstrated in a recent article,¹³ the starting point for every church reform movement has been a movement to “return to the sources,” and this is precisely what we see in the same period in the Protestant world with dialectical theology,

11 G. Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, p. II, in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 6, 301, 308.

12 For similar remarks, cf. B. Gallaher, “‘Waiting for the Barbarians’: Identity and Polemicism in Georges Florovsky” (unpublished paper presented at the International Conference: “Le Père Georges Florovsky et le renouveau de la théologie orthodoxe au 20e siècle,” St Sergius Institute, Paris, November 27–28, 2009).

13 P. Kalaitzidis, “Challenges of Renewal and Reformation Facing the Orthodox Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 61 (2009): especially 144–46.

and in the Catholic milieu with the biblical, patristic, and liturgical renewal movements. Moreover, just as these western movements are inconceivable outside of the challenges posed by modernity, so were they basically efforts to respond to modernity also in the Orthodox Diaspora, where the movement to “return to the Fathers” first appeared, as well as its rival, the Russian school of theology, which is represented primarily by the great Russian theologian and priest Fr Sergei Bulgakov (a former Marxist economist and later an influential personality among the Russian Diaspora in Paris as professor and dean of the St Sergius Institute). The difference is that while the respective western theological movements were ultimately being created within the framework of modernity, the corresponding Orthodox movement of “return” that was represented by the neo-patristic school—which won out over the Russian school of theology—served as a bulwark against modernity.

Indeed, these two theological schools pursued different or even opposite approaches to the modern world's challenges to Orthodoxy's self-consciousness.¹⁴ It seems that the Russian school of theology held a world-affirmative stance which sought to open Orthodoxy to the conditions and demands of modernity, while the neo-patristic theology supported a more or less restrained and contemplative approach, calling for a “return to the Fathers” and for Orthodoxy's liberation from the western and modernist influences of the past centuries, thus preventing Orthodox theology from

14 I follow in this part of my paper the analysis made by P. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), especially 1–11; and Kristina Stöckl, *Community after Totalitarianism. The Eastern Orthodox Intellectual Tradition and the Philosophical Discourse of Political Modernity* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2008), especially 94–104. Cf. A. Schmemmann, “Russian Theology: 1920–1972. An Introductory Survey,” *SVTQ* 16 (1972): 172–94; R. Williams, “Russian Christian Thought,” in A. Hastings, A. Mason, and H. Pyper (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 630–33; M. Kadavil, “Some Recent Trends on the Sacramentality of Creation in Eastern-Oriental Traditions,” in J. Haers and P. D. Mey, *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology* (Leuven & Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2003), especially 324–30; A. Papanikolaou, “Orthodox Theology,” in: E. Fahlbusch and J. M. Lochman (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI & Leiden: Eerdmans-Brill, 2008), 414–18.

becoming really involved in modern issues. As some scholars suggest, the conflict between the two opposite schools was a debate between modernists and traditionalists,¹⁵ liberals and conservatives,¹⁶ and a confrontation over Orthodox theology’s orientation either “back to the fathers” or “beyond the fathers.”¹⁷ But as Kristina Stöckl points out:

A closer look at the Neo-Patristic position shows, however, that none of these designations quite exhausts what was at stake. The theological dispute between the two schools did not arise around the question whether the Orthodox Church needed a renewal after centuries-long stagnation and Western influence—on this there was consensus—and not even on the issue whether the Church should be engaged in the world—also this was a shared view—but on the question on which basis such a renewal and engagement with the world could take place. [...] I suggest to view the Russian School and Neo-Patristics as two ways in which twentieth-century Orthodox thought has responded to the challenges of the modern world. [...] The Russian School was inspired by the Marxist critique of Western capitalism and by romanticism, its ideal was an engaged Church that would assume an active role in the life of modern society. The Neo-Patristic thinkers sought their response to the modern condition on an entirely different basis. Neo-Patristic theology took a perspective outside of the modern world, namely in the Patristic tradition, from where it wanted to draw the conceptual tools for an engagement with the modern world. Neo-Patristic theology thereby offered the basis for a more general philosophical-ontological critique of modernism, the full potential of which was realized first and foremost by its Neo-Palamist philosophical strand. Both Russian School theology and Neo-Patristics are ways of responding to the challenges of the modern world, of

15 R. Bird, “The Tragedy of Russian Religious Philosophy: Sergei Bulgakov and the Future of Orthodox Theology,” in J. Sutton and W. van den Bercken (ed.), *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 211–28.

16 A. Schmemmann, “Russian Theology: 1920–1972. An Introductory Survey,” op cit, 178.

17 P. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, op cit, 376. Cf. Stöckl, op cit, 98.

partaking in the condition of modernity. It would be wrong, however, to claim that these two approaches account for the entire range of Orthodox responses to modernity, they did not in the 1930s and they do not today. A large spectrum of Orthodoxy today seems not to engage with modernity at all, it simply turns away from it, condemns it or tries to reconstruct itself outside of it.¹⁸

It thus becomes clear that the issue of modernity and the dilemma whether to go “back to the fathers” or “beyond the fathers” are of crucial importance for our discussion. The Russian school of theology seemed to be more open both to the issues raised by the modern world and to the need for a post-patristic theology. Fr Alexander Schmemmann describes its theological task:

Orthodox theology must keep its patristic foundations, but it must also go “beyond” the Fathers if it is to respond to a new situation created by centuries of philosophical development. And in this new synthesis or reconstruction, the western philosophical tradition (source and mother of the Russian “religious philosophy” of the 19th and 20th centuries) rather than the Hellenistic, must supply theology with its conceptual framework. An attempt is thus made to “transpose” theology into a new “key,” and this transposition is considered as the specific task and vocation of Russian theology.¹⁹

Unfortunately, the connection between this theological trend—particularly in the person of Bulgakov—and German idealism and Sophiology, and the ensuing dogmatic battle with Lossky and Florovsky, rendered it, for all intents and purposes, a dead letter and made it impossible for decades to have any serious discussion about the potential for a post-patristic theology within Orthodoxy, thus leaving the “return to the Fathers” as the only viable Orthodox “paradigm” for the better part of the 20th century, with all the consequences that this monopoly would have.

18 Stöckl, *op cit*, 103–4.

19 Schmemmann, “Russian Theology: 1920–1972. An Introductory Survey,” *op cit*, 178.

The Consequences of the Theological Movement to “Return to the Fathers”

The consequences of this “return to the Fathers” and the subsequent over-emphasis on patristic studies were, among other things: (1) the neglect and devaluation of biblical studies; (2) an ahistorical approach to patristic theology and a subsequent exaltation of traditionalism; (3) a tendency toward introversion and Orthodox theology’s near total absence from the major theological developments and trends of the 20th century; (4) the polarization of East and West, and the cultivation and consolidation of an anti-western and anti-ecumenical spirit; and (5) a weak theological response to the challenges posed by the modern world and, more generally, the unresolved theological issues still remaining in the relationship between Orthodoxy and modernity.

1. Within the Orthodox milieu, biblical studies had already suffered neglect; now there was a theoretical justification for it. Biblical studies were viewed as “Protestant,” while patristic studies and the rediscovery of the Orthodox ascetic and neptic tradition were considered the truly “Orthodox” subjects. In spite of the proliferation of patristic studies in the second half of the 20th century both in the Orthodox Diaspora and in the traditionally Orthodox countries, and the subsequent strengthening of the characteristic theological features of Orthodox “identity,” the role of biblical studies in our theological bedrock was still an open question, such that, as is well known, we Orthodox continue to underestimate or even be suspicious of biblical studies and biblical research, even to the point that we regard the reading and study of the Bible as a Protestant practice that is at odds with the Orthodox patristic and neptic ethos. Indeed, imitating the old “Protestant” principle of the objective authority of the text, we often simply replace the authority of *sola scriptura* with the authority of the *consensus patrum*. Ultimately, in practice, the authority and the study of the patristic texts—the vast majority of which are essentially interpretive commentaries on the Bible—has acquired greater importance and gravitas than the biblical text itself. Thus, Orthodox theology overlooked the biblical

foundations of the Christian faith, the indissoluble bond between the Bible and the eucharist, the Bible and the liturgy. And while we based our claims to be Orthodox on the Fathers, we ignored the fact that all the great Fathers were major interpreters of the Scriptures. It was forgotten that patristic theology is simultaneously unconfused and indivisible biblical theology, and Orthodox tradition, as well as Orthodox theology, are patristic and biblical at the same time; they are patristic and Orthodox only to the extent that they are also biblical.²⁰

2. Patristic theology was mythologized, removed from its historical context and approached ahistorically, almost metaphysically. The particular historical circumstances in which the patristic works were written, the Fathers' continuous interaction and dialogue with the philosophy and outside philosophical trends of their era, their study and free use of the hermeneutical methods of their time—all this was forgotten. And we have not yet adequately considered what appears to be the most characteristic example of the Church taking up elements initially foreign to its own theological and ontological assumptions and fruitfully assimilating them into its life and theology. Today, we have come to regard that encounter as self-evident, forgetting the titanic battles that preceded it. Perhaps we are unaware or fail to notice how difficult and painful it was for primitive Christianity (with its Jewish and generally Semitic roots and origins) to accept and incorporate Hellenic concepts and cate-

20 For similar remarks and bibliographical references, cf. P. Kalaitzidis, "Rudolf Bultmann's *History and Eschatology*—The Theory of Demythologization and Interiorized Existential Eschatology: Putting Bultmann in Conversation with Contemporary Greek Theology," introduction to the Greek edition of the Rudolf Bultmann's classic work, *History and Eschatology. The Presence of Eternity* (Athens: Indiktos Publications, 2008), lix [in Greek]. Florovsky's approach seems to lean in another direction: "The witness of the fathers belongs integrally and intrinsically, to the very structure of the orthodox faith. The Church is equally committed to the kerygma of the Apostles and to the dogmata of the Fathers. Both belong together inseparably. The Church is indeed 'Apostolic.' But the Church is also 'Patristic.' And only by being 'Patristic' is the Church continuously 'Apostolic.' The Fathers testify to the Apostolicity of the Tradition," G. Florovsky "Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church" in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 4: *Aspects of Church History*, op cit, 16.

gories such as nature, essence, *homoousion*, *hypostasis*, person, *logos*, intellect, *nous*, meaning, cause, power, accident, energy, *kath' holou*, cosmos, etc.²¹ But this ahistorical approach to patristic theology is in fact a “betrayal” of the spirit of the Fathers inasmuch as it betrays and ignores the very core and essence of their thought, i.e., a continuous dialogue with the world, and an encounter with and assumption of the historical, social, cultural, and scientific context of their time, as is particularly well illustrated by the great fourth-century Fathers’ engagement with Hellenism. Today, in contrast to the boldness and breadth of the Fathers, the widespread propagation, popularization, and “necessity” of the call to “return to the Fathers” not only made the Fathers an integral part of an Orthodox “fad” and of the dominant Orthodox “establishment,” but has also come to characterize and accompany every kind of neo-conservative and fundamentalist version of Orthodox theology. And the constant invocation of the authority of the Fathers for every sort of problem—even those issues that could not have existed in the patristic age—led to the objectification of patristic theology and to a peculiar “patristic fundamentalism” not unlike the biblical fundamentalism of extremist Protestant groups. Finally, this ahistorical approach to patristic thought led to the suppression of the contribution of western theology in the movement to rediscover the theology of the Greek Fathers and to liberate theology from scholasticism. In fact, as is well known, starting as early as the first half of the 20th century, western theology in all its forms has been traveling its own path of repentance and self-critique, making its own attempt to be liberated from the confines of neo-scholastic and rationalistic theology; its most eminent representatives have been searching for the tradition of the undivided Church, and seeking dialogue and contact with the modern world. The rediscovery of the eschatological identity of the Church, primarily in the realm of German Protestantism, and the renewal movements within Roman Catholic theology, such as the movement to return to the Fathers (the most representative

21 For a more detailed analysis of this idea, cf. P. Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Modernity: An Introduction*, (Athens: Indiktos Publications, 2007), 69 ff. [in Greek].

examples of which are Fourvière's school in Lyons and the publication of the patristic works series "Sources Chrétiennes" by its preeminent collaborators²²), the liturgical renewal movement,²³ the reconnection of the Bible with the liturgy,²⁴ as well as the Church's and theology's social commitment, are only some of the aspects of western theology's attempt at liberation and self-critique, which were connected with the so-called "nouvelle théologie"²⁵ movement, without which the Orthodox movement for the "return to the Fathers" would probably have been impossible.²⁶

3. Concerned as it was with the very serious matter of freeing itself from western influence and "returning to the Fathers"—dealing, in other words, with issues of self-understanding and identity—Orthodox theology, with a few exceptions, was basically absent from the major theological discussions of the 20th century and had almost no influence in setting the theological agenda. Dialectical theology, existential and hermeneutical theology, the theology of history and culture, the theology of secularization and modernity, the "nouvelle théologie," contextual theologies, the theology of hope and political theology, liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, ecumenical theology, the theology of mission, the theology of religions and otherness—this whole revolution that occurred in the theological work of the 20th century barely touched Orthodox theology. Rather, during this period, Orthodox theology was concerned with its own "internal" problems; escaping "western

22 For the history of this editorial attempt, cf. Ét. Fouilloux, *La collection «Sources Chrétiennes»*. *Éditer les Pères de l'Église au XXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1995).

23 On this point, cf. Dom Olivier Rousseau, *Histoire du mouvement liturgique* (Paris, 1945); B. E. Koenker, *The Liturgical Renaissance in the Roman Catholic Church* (Chicago, 1954); H. J. Stawley, *The Liturgical Movement* (Oxford, 1954). Cf. the special issue of the journal *La Maison Dieu* 25 (1951) with the title: "Avenir et risques du renouveau liturgique."

24 Cf. especially the classic work of J. Daniélou, *Bible et liturgie. La théologie biblique des sacrements et des fêtes d'après les pères de l'Église*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1958).

25 For an informative update on all these trends, cf. R. Gibellini, *La teologia del XX secolo*, 4th ed. (Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 1999).

26 For an exhaustive analysis of the questions raised above, cf. P. Kalaitzidis, *Hellenicity and Anti-westernism in the Greek Theological Generation of the 60's*, op cit, especially 40–58 [in Greek].

influence” had become one of its priorities. These theological trends, with the exception perhaps of ecumenical theology, the theology of mission, and the movement for patristic and liturgical renewal, do not appear to have been influenced by Orthodoxy, despite the fact that important Orthodox theologians actively participated in the ecumenical movement from its inception.²⁷ Orthodox theology’s silence and absence from the contemporary theological discussions does not seem to have gone unnoticed by modern western theologians, who have not failed to point out Orthodoxy’s inability to be expressed in contemporary terms and its continued invocation of the authority of the Fathers and of tradition.²⁸

4. Judging from the results, it can hardly be denied that the “return to the Fathers” has contributed decisively—and negatively—to the polarization between East and West, to Orthodoxy’s total rejection of the West, and to the cultivation and consolidation of an anti-western and anti-ecumenical spirit. In referring to anti-westernism, we do not at all mean the perfectly legitimate criticisms of the West and its deviations from the tradition of the undivided Church, nor the practice of pointing out the differences in a calm and collected way, nor the illustration of the West’s problems and impasses. We refer, rather, to that simplified “straw man,” to that one-sided, inaccurate, and vituperative criticism, which sees in the West only errors, heresies, betrayals, and alterations to Christianity (while at the same time praising the East for its fidelity to tradition), and which, going beyond the historical facts, restages reality by continuing to read the relationship between East and West as a relationship of constant confrontation, conflict, and division, thus erasing ten centuries of common Christian life and ecclesiastical communion, and forgetting that the catholicity of the Church entails both East and West.

27 It is noteworthy that not even one Orthodox theologian is mentioned in the voluminous classic work of R. Gibellini, *La teologia del XX secolo*, op cit.

28 H. Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium. An Ecumenical View*, tr. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 57–59.

Here we run into a major paradox, which is worth stopping to analyze. Fr Georges Florovsky, who was the main proponent of the “return to the Fathers,” and the most important theologian both within this movement and within Orthodoxy as a whole during the 20th century, was reared not only on patristic literature, hymnology, and even the Bible, but also by the great works of contemporary western theology, which he took into consideration or with which he was in constant dialogue (A. von Harnack, K. Barth, E. Brunner, Y. Congar, H. de Lubac, L. Bouyer, E. L. Mascall, R. Bultmann, A. Nygren, J. A. Moehler, E. Mersch, P. Batiffol, G. L. Prestige, G. Kittel, E. Gilson, J. Lebreton, P. Tillich, et al). Moreover, Florovsky never adopted the idea of a polarization between East and West; he utilized the Latin Fathers, such as Augustine, in his ecclesiological works; he wrote many of his classic studies for an ecumenical audience or as an Orthodox contribution to ecumenical meetings; and, above all, he was always quick to maintain that the catholicity of the Church could not only not exist with only the West, but also that it could not exist with only the East, and that catholicity requires both lungs of the Church, western and eastern, like Siamese twins.²⁹ However, as we already noted above, the movement for a “return to the Fathers” was significantly influenced by the participation and the work of other theologians (Lossky, Staniloae, Popovic, et al), while the positions and the general theological line of thought which ultimately prevailed was, in many places, at odds with Florovsky’s positions, such as, most notably, an intense anti-westernism and anti-ecumenism. The Fathers and their theology were often seen as the unique characteristic and exclusive property of the East—thus blatantly ignoring the Christian West’s important contributions in rediscovering the Fathers—while more than a few times patristic theology was used to wage an outdated

29 Cf. G. Florovsky, “The Legacy and the Task of Orthodox Theology,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 31 (1949): 65–71; idem, “Some Contributors to 20th century Ecumenical Thought,” *Ecumenism II. A Historical Approach*, vol. 14 of *Collected Works of G. Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1989), 209–10; G. Florovsky, “Ways of Russian Theology,” in *Aspects of Church History*, vol. 4 of *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1989), 202–4.

and illogical invective against the West. Thus Orthodoxy was seen as having the wealth and authenticity of the Fathers’ thought, a rich liturgical experience, and mystical theology, while the spiritually emaciated West lacked all these things and instead was content with scholasticism and pietism, theological rationalism, and legalism. As a result, younger Orthodox theologians, particularly in traditionally Orthodox countries, learned not only the interpretive schema of an orthodox East versus a heretical West, but it also became commonplace to contrast, in a self-satisfied way, the better version which is Orthodoxy (with the Cappadocian Fathers, Maximus the Confessor, so-called “mystical” theology, St Gregory Palamas, the Russian theology of the Diaspora, etc.) with the inferior version represented by the West (with its scholastic theology, Thomas Aquinas, the Holy Inquisition, a theology of legalism and pietism, etc.). This is how the modern West remains understood today in many Orthodox countries. Despite the significant progress that has taken place in the fields of patristic studies, the theology of the local church, and eucharistic ecclesiology, the West is still seen through this distorted lens for reasons of convenience and simplicity or, more simply, from ignorance. This climate has abetted in depriving the newer Orthodox theological generation of the right and the possibility of becoming familiar and interacting with the fundamental works of western theology, which remain, for the most part, untranslated or unknown in the Orthodox world. We have thus forgotten how much Russian Diaspora theology, as well as the “return to the Fathers” movement itself, owes to the West;³⁰ the Orthodox theology of the second half of the 20th century has lost, in other words, its sense of history and interaction.³¹

30 The neo-patristic school’s ascent over the theology of the Russian school after the 1930s and 1940s, was aided by, among others, western converts to Orthodoxy who shared its passion for the liturgical, ascetical and mystical traditions of the Fathers; cf. P. Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key*, op cit, 5, 6.

31 Cf. P. Kalaitzidis, *Hellenicity and Anti-westernism in the Greek Theological Generation of the 60’s*, op cit, especially 54, 48 [in Greek].

The case of the other great theologian of the neo-patristic movement and of the “return to the Fathers,” the more conservative and “traditional” Vladimir Lossky, is even more complicated with regard to the issue of anti-westernism. The work of this great Orthodox theologian of the Russian Diaspora, and particularly his classic work *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*³² (which, apart from the impact it had in the West and on western theologians, was particularly influential among younger Orthodox theologians on the issue of mysticism, and inspired a renewed interest in the Areopagite corpus and Palamism, especially among the Greeks and other Eastern Orthodox), was in constant dialogue with the western Christian tradition, and, in fact, was inspired, in a positive and fruitful way, by the movement for a patristic revival which was taking place at that time within the Roman Catholic Church, as Meyendorff notes:

This book was a response to an urgent need: French Catholicism was undergoing a period of patristic and liturgical rediscovery, which spread to other European countries, particularly Germany, after the war. Lossky was the Orthodox voice that sought a meeting with this movement, presenting the challenging riches of Eastern Orthodoxy to the West.³³

But as Kristina Stöckl notes in her study:

Lossky, despite his rejection of the philosophical and theological language that determined much of the Slavophile and Eurasian antagonizing against the West, was himself frequently accentuating the difference between the East and the West on doctrinal grounds. Lossky seems to have been careful not to derive political or cultural claims from this distinction, but some of his disciples, for example Christos Yannaras, did in fact fall into bold statements of cultural and political nature. Lossky's work contains all elements that have made the reception of contemporary Orthodoxy in the East and in the West

32 V. Lossky, *Essai sur la Théologie Mystique de l'Église d'Orient* (Paris: Aubier, 1944). English translation: *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clark, 1957).

33 J. Meyendorff, “Lossky, le militant,” *Contacts*, no. 106 (1979): 208–9.

both fruitful and problematic, that have allowed for the interpretation that there is something new under-way in Orthodox thought, and for the dismissive opinion that it is all a well-rehearsed repetition of Orthodox exceptionalism and Slavophile thought.³⁴

What is beyond doubt, however, is the fact that both the Russian theology of the Diaspora and other theological movements for renewal in other Orthodox countries flourished and developed in an environment of dialogue with the West, and not in an environment of zealotry and Orthodox introversion. And so, as strange or even scandalous as it may seem to some, it was the meeting and dialogue with the West that led to the renaissance of Orthodox theology in the 20th century and to its release from its “Babylonian captivity” to western scholastic and pietistic theology. The opportunities and fruitful challenges posed to the Orthodox by the ecumenical dialogue ultimately led Orthodox theology out of its parochial introversion and its insular self-sufficiency, and contributed decisively to the emergence of the great forms of the theology of the Diaspora, and to the original syntheses of Greek-speaking theology, such as the theology of the person.³⁵ Orthodox fundamentalism—which very often thrives in monastic or pro-monastic environments, and which considers anti-westernism and anti-ecumenism as constitutive elements of the Orthodox self-consciousness and as the most defining characteristics of patristic theology—obscures and obstinately refuses to accept these truths.

5. In spite of the theological interests of Florovsky and other Orthodox theologians who followed him (e.g., the Incarnation, the historicity of theology and the openness of history, the contextualization of the word of Gospel, the catholicity of the Church, which

34 Kristina Stöckl, *Community after Totalitarianism*, op cit, 101. Cf. P. Kalaitzidis, *Hellenicity and Anti-westernism in the Greek Theological Generation of the 60's*, op cit, 51, 530–35 [in Greek].

35 Cf. J. D. Zizioulas, “Ortodossia,” in *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, Istituto dell' Enciclopedia Italiana, vol. V, (Roma, 1981), 6. Cf. also, P. Kalaitzidis, *Hellenicity and Anti-westernism in the Greek Theological Generation of the 60's*, op cit, especially 47 [in Greek].

includes both East and West, etc.), and their lasting concern for a creative and rejuvenating engagement with the spirit of the Fathers, i.e., for a neo-patristic synthesis and renaissance, we must admit that the “return to the Fathers” and “Christian Hellenism,” as a proposal for a theological agenda, is basically a conservative choice, inasmuch as they ultimately refer more to theology’s past than to the present and the future. And while this theological movement’s intention is to push Orthodoxy out of its inertia and into a dialogue with the contemporary world on the basis of the neo-patristic synthesis, the movement itself is essentially absent from the theological agenda that establishes the broader historical context of this dialogue, viz. modernity and late modernity. We should, of course, remember that, for primarily historical reasons, the Orthodox world did not organically participate in the phenomenon of modernity. It did not experience the Renaissance, the Reformation, or the Counter-Reformation, religious wars or the Enlightenment, the French or the Industrial revolution, the rise of the subject, human rights, or the religiously neutral nation-state. What has been recognized as the core of modernity seems to have remained alien to Orthodoxy, which continues to be suspicious of modernity. This uncertainty helps explain Orthodoxy’s difficulty in communicating with the contemporary (post-) modern world, and it raises at the same time the question of whether or not Orthodox Christianity and (neo) patristic theology came to an end before modernity.

Indeed, if we consider the precedent of the Roman Catholic Church, we will see that scholastic philosophy and theology—when it was reinstated in the second half of the nineteenth century with Neo-Thomism at the forefront—was meant to be, among other things, a defense against the challenges that modernity posed to the inflexible theological establishment of the Roman Catholic Church at that time; therefore, *mutatis mutandis*, the crucial question in the present context is the following: has not the celebrated “return to the Fathers,” as it has been understood and applied by several Orthodox theologians, served also as a bulwark against modernity and the challenges it posed, in spite of itself and contrary to its declared

aim of renewal? Has it not thus hindered both the word of God in its incarnation and revelation within each particular social and cultural context, and the development, within Orthodox theology, of hermeneutics, biblical and historical research, systematic theology, anthropological and feminist studies, and political, liberation, and ecumenical theology? Has it not contributed in its own way to making the entire Orthodox ecclesial life a prisoner to pre-modern structures and practices and to a conservative mentality?

In any case, modernity and post-modernity (or late modernity) and the framework they provide constitute the broader historical, social, and cultural environment within which the Orthodox Church is called to live and carry out its mission; it is here that the Church is called upon time and time again to incarnate the Christian truth about God, the world and humanity. Certainly, modern Orthodox theology, inspired mainly by the spirit of the Fathers, reformulated during the 20th century an admirable theology of the Incarnation, of “assuming flesh.” However, its position on a series of issues revolving, essentially, around aspects of the modernist phenomenon, but also the core of its ecclesial self-understanding, has often left this otherwise remarkable theology of Incarnation in abeyance and socially inert. Such issues include human rights, the secularization of politics and institutions, the desacralization of politics and ethnicity, the overturning of established social hierarchies in the name of a fairer society, the affirmation of love and corporeality and the spiritual function of sexuality, the position of women, social and cultural anachronisms, and so forth. The typical Orthodox approach to such issues, sadly, confirms yet again the view that Orthodox people content themselves with theory, and make no progress or fall tragically short when it comes to practice; that we prefer to “contemplate” and “observe” rather than to act, forgetting or side-stepping the fundamentally antinomic and anti-conventional character of the ecclesial event and settling down in the safe confines of “tradition” and customs handed down from the past, and the comfort of the traditional society which, in the minds of many, is by its very nature identical to “Tradition” itself.

Yet theology at least ought to be incarnate, to remind us constantly of the antinomic and idoloclastic character of the ecclesial event, but also to commit itself to the consequences and repercussions of the theology of the Incarnation.³⁶

The Need for a New Incarnation of the Word and the Challenges of Contextual Theologies

If every text always has a “con-text,” and if we agree that the specific and determinant context of patristic theology was the then-dominant Greek philosophy and culture, then we must seriously and honestly consider whether we are facing today the same context, and if we are living and creating in the framework of the same type of culture, or if we are facing the challenges of a post-hellenic and consequently post-patristic era.³⁷ And if we do, the next crucial question is whether the duty and the task of theology is to defend or to preserve a certain era, a certain culture, a certain language, or, on the contrary, to serve the truth of the Gospel and the people of God in every time, in every space, and through every culture or language. Because there is no such thing as a universal theology in abstract, a kind of ahistorical, unaltered, and timeless tradition and monolithic conception; theology occurs only in specific historical and cultural contexts and in response to specific questions and challenges. Accordingly, *contextual theology* refers to both a way

36 Cf. P. Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Modernity: An Introduction*, op cit, 100–101, 104–5 [in Greek]. It is worth noting that the questions raised above with regard to *the Orthodox Church and modernity* were discussed, considered, and researched as part of the program at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies of the Holy Metropolis of Demetrias (Volos, Greece) in the 2001–2002 academic year. The conference texts and presentations were compiled and published by Indiktos Publications, Athens, in 2007 [in Greek]. In addition, the St John of Damascus Institute of Theology at the University of Balamand in Lebanon organized an international symposium on “Thinking Modernity: Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship between Orthodox Theology and Modern Culture” on 3–5 December 2007, in conjunction with the Chair of Orthodox Theology at the Centre for Religious Studies of the University of Münster in Germany. The volume of the proceedings from this Symposium is under publication.

37 I make use in the present paragraph of elements of the analysis taken from my book *Orthodoxy and Modernity: An Introduction*, op cit, 105–7, 109 [in Greek].

of understanding the theological project and a methodological framework for "doing theology." It is evident that the above analysis presupposes an approach, at once constructive and critical, of contextual theology. While it can sometimes go too far, contextual theology highlights the close link between the text and its context, and reminds us that we cannot do theology in a purely intellectual or academic way, abstracted from time, history, and the socio-cultural context, from pastoral needs and from the myriad different forms of human culture and theological expression.³⁸

Therefore, theology, as the prophetic voice and expression of the Church's self-understanding, must function in reference to the antinomic and dual-natured character of the Church. Just as the Church is not of this world, so theology aims at expressing a charismatic experience and a transcendent reality, over and above words, concepts, or names. Just as the Church lives and goes forth into the world, so theology seeks dialogue and communication with the historical present in every age, adopting the language, the flesh and the thought-world of each particular era, of the historical and cultural present at any given time. Theology is not coextensive with history and cannot be identified with history; but neither can it function in the absence of history and, more importantly, it cannot

38 For a constructive and critical contextual theology approach by Orthodox theologians, cf. N. Nissiotis, "Ecclesial Theology in Context," in Song Choan-Seng (ed.), *Doing Theology Today* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1976), 101–24; E. Clapsis, "The Challenge of Contextual Theologies," in *Orthodoxy in Conversation. Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements* (Geneva/Brookline, MA: WCC Publications/Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 165–72; Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, "The Patristic Heritage and Modernity," in *Orthodox Witness Today* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006), especially 152–65; P. Vassiliadis, "Orthodoxy and Contextual Theology," in *Lex Orandi, Studies in Liturgical Theology*, 1st ed. (Thessaloniki, 1994), 139–56 [in Greek]. Some interesting presentations on the topic were given at the international symposium held in 1992 in Thessaloniki, Greece, by the University of Thessaloniki School of Theology, in conjunction with the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, on the role of Orthodox theology in the ecumenical movement and dialogue between "classical" and "contextual" theologies. The texts of the speeches from the conference were published in the Greek theological review *Kath' Odon*, no. 4 (January–April 1993) [in Greek], and a French-language report appeared in edition no. 173 (December 1992) of the *Service Orthodoxe de Presse* (SOP), 7.

keep ignoring the lessons of history. Without this process of unconfused osmosis and reception of the world and of history, without this gesture of dialogue, moving towards the world and “witnessing” to it, neither the Church nor theology can exist, nor can God’s revelation, since the Church does not exist for itself but for the world and for the benefit of the world: “for the life of the world.”³⁹ After all, God’s Revelation has always taken place within creation and history,⁴⁰ not in some unhistorical, timeless universe unrelated to the world. As the late theologian Panagiotis Nellas, founder of the well-known Greek theological journal *Synaxis*, noted prophetically more than twenty years ago:

... it is not possible today to have a true Revelation of God without employing as the material for that revelation today’s social, cultural, scientific, and other realities. It is impossible for God to motivate, to move man unless He comes into contact with our particular, historical flesh; it is not possible for Him to save man, unless He transfigures our life.⁴¹

Expanding on this line of thought, we might add therefore that a fleshless theology which refuses to converse with the wider social and cultural realities of its time is inconceivable, whether it is dealing with modernity, post-modernity, or late modernity. A theology that does not take to itself the “flesh” of its time is equally inconceivable—just as it is inconceivable for the Church to be insular, refusing to be drawn out of itself to meet the world and history, to evangelize and transform it. Thus, the Church and its theology cannot move forward in the world while ignoring or devaluing the world that surrounds them, simply because this world is not “Christian,” because it is not as they would like it or the sort of world that would suit them. Similarly, the Church and its theology cannot motivate and move the people of today, the people of modernity and late modernity, as long as the modern world

39 Cf. Jn 6:51.

40 See N. Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Creedal Theology*, vol. II (Thessaloniki: Pournaras Publications, 1985), 58 [in Greek].

41 P. Nellas, “The Light of the Word: Theological Perspectives on Overcoming the Crisis in the Teaching of Religious Education,” *Synaxis*, issue 14 (1985): 101 [in Greek].

continues to be scorned and disparaged by the Church, neglected as revelatory material and flesh to be assumed.

It is imperative, then, for Orthodox theology to examine the possibility of devising, through the Holy Spirit, new terms and new names (“to coin new names,” in the words of St Gregory the Theologian), correlated to today’s needs and challenges, just as the need for a new incarnation of the Word and the eternal truth of the Gospel is also urgently necessary. A theology of repetition, a theology that is satisfied simply with a “return to the sources,” or that relies on the “return to the Fathers” and the neo-patristic synthesis, cannot, by definition, respond to this need and the manifold challenges of the post-modern pluralistic world. What is therefore required is not a repetition and a perpetuation of the denial and the reticence often adopted by the Orthodox in their stance towards modernity and pluralism, but a creative encounter and a serious theological dialogue with whatever challenges modernity and post-modernity pose, a “re-orientation [of modernity] from inside,” to use the fine expression of His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch.⁴² Will the Orthodox Church be faithful to a renewed theanthropism and an authentic theology of Incarnation, and, inspired by the vision and the experience of the Resurrection, internalize the tradition, the boldness, and the mind of the Fathers and the grand theological syntheses that they worked out, mainly in the East? Will it enter into dialogue and even attempt (why not?) a new synthesis with the best in modernity, actualizing the encounter between East and West that we have been hearing about for decades?

The Eschatological Understanding of Tradition

From an Orthodox point of view, the key to addressing the above topics and to answering all these questions can be found in eschatology.⁴³ Eschatology introduces an element of active

42 Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, *Orthodoxy and the Issues of Our Time*, translated from Arabic by S. O’Sullivan (Balamand: Publications of the University of Balamand, 2006), 222–24.

43 I make use in the present section of elements of the analysis taken from the books: P. Kalaitzidis (ed.), *Church and Eschatology*, Volos Academy for Theological Studies

expectation accompanied by the dimension of the future and the renewing breeze of the Spirit, dimensions so definitive for the life and theology of the Church and yet so lacking today. For in response to the challenge of globalization, cosmopolitanism and internationalism, today the wind of traditionalism and fundamentalism is once again blowing violently through the life and theology of the Church. Whereas fundamentalism is a flight into the past of pre-modernity and involves turning back the course of history, eschatology is an active and demanding expectation of the coming Kingdom of God, the new world which we await; as such, it feeds into a dynamic commitment to the present, an affirmation and openness to the future of the Kingdom in which the fullness and identity of the Church is to be found. In other words, the Church does not derive its substance principally from what it is, but rather from what it will become in the future, in the eschatological time which, since the Resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, has already begun to illuminate and influence the present and history.

In the light of eschatology, even the Tradition of the Church itself acquires a new meaning and a different dimension, an optimistic and hopeful perspective. In this perspective, Tradition is not identified with habits, customs, traditions, ideas, or in general with historical inertia and stagnation, but with a person, Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory who is coming. As Saint Cyprian of Carthage reminds us, "The Lord said: I am the Truth. He did not say: I am the custom."⁴⁴ Tradition does not relate chiefly to the past; or to put it differently, it is not bound by the patterns of the past, by events that have already happened. Strange as it may sound, in the authentic ecclesial perspective, Tradition is orientated toward the future. It comes principally and primarily from the future of the Kingdom of God, from the One who is coming, from what has yet to be fully revealed and made manifest, from what God's love and His plan is preparing for us, for the salvation of the world and man. So the eschato-

Winter Program 2000–01 (Athens: Kastaniotis Publications, 2003) [in Greek]; P. Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Modernity: An Introduction*, op cit, 163–78 [in Greek].

44 Saint Cyprian of Carthage, *Sententiae episcoporum*, 87, 30.

logical understanding of Tradition appears as the counterpart to the Pauline definition of faith: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,”⁴⁵ or as the analogue of the eschatological “memory of the future” as this is experienced in the Anaphora Prayer at the Divine Liturgy: “Remembering therefore this saving commandment and all that has been brought about for our sake: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the ascent into heaven, the sitting at the right hand *and the glorious Second Coming.*” And this because, according to the *scholia* on the Areopagitic writings attributed to St Maximus the Confessor (though this is actually a passage that scholarship now ascribes to John of Scythopolis), the entire Divine Liturgy represents not some eternal heavenly archetypes or some reality in the realm of ideas, but the eschatological Kingdom which is to come, a reality of the future where the truth of things and of symbols is to be found.⁴⁶

Therefore, just as it is the last things that give being to the first things, and eschatology that gives being to protology, similarly it is the Kingdom of God—the fullness of life and of truth which will come to completion and be fully revealed at the Eschaton—that defines and gives meaning to the Tradition of the Church. The future is therefore the cause and not the effect of the past, since, according to Metropolitan John Zizioulas:

The world was created for the eschatological Christ who will come at the Eschaton as the union of the created and the uncreated. The Church experiences this, according to St Maximus, in the Holy Eucharist: there, what will be at the Eschaton happens now in reality, the future becomes the cause of the present. In the Holy Eucharist, we travel backwards in time: from the future to the present and the past.⁴⁷

45 Heb 11:1. Cf. Rom 8:24. Cf. also the entire context of Heb 11.

46 Maximus the Confessor (John of Scythopolis), *Scholia on On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, PG 4, 137 CD. On the attribution of this passage to John of Scythopolis, see P. Rorem and J. C. Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* (Oxford: Clarendon Press / New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 174.

47 Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, “The Church and the Eschaton,” in P. Kalaitzidis (ed.), *Church and Eschatology*, op cit, 42 [in Greek].

Or, to recall the apt words of the late Greek theologian Nikos Nissiotis:

So the Tradition of Orthodoxy [...] is not history but witness; it is not the fully accomplished fact of past centuries, but the summons to fulfill it in the future [...] Tradition as understood from this Beginning is the “new,” that which irrupts into the world in order to make all things new once and for all in Christ, and then continuously in the Holy Spirit through the Church.⁴⁸

In the words of Fr Georges Florovsky himself, the initiator of the famous “return to the Fathers” and of the “neo-patristic synthesis”:

Thus “tradition” in the Church is not merely the continuity of human memory, or the permanence of rites and habits. Ultimately, “tradition” is the continuity of divine assistance, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. The Church is not bound by “the letter.” She is constantly moved forth by “the spirit.” The same Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, which “spoke through the Prophets” which guided the Apostles, which illumined the Evangelists, is still abiding in the Church, and guides her into the fuller understanding of the divine truth, from glory to glory.⁴⁹

Looked at from this angle, then, Tradition is not the letter that kills, a nostalgic repetition or uncritical acceptance or continuation of the past, but a creative continuity in the Holy Spirit and an openness to the future, to the new world of the Kingdom of God, which we actively await. Seen in this light, it seems that the patristic tradition with its various expressions acquires another meaning and another perspective, inasmuch as it, in turn, is judged and investigated in light of the Eschaton and the coming Kingdom of God, while the celebrated “return to the Fathers” is a mile-marker in a dynamic journey of the broader renewal, in the Holy Spirit, of Orthodox

48 N. Nissiotis, “Orthodoxy, Tradition and Renewal. The Problem of Cultural Relations between Orthodoxy and Hellenism in the Future,” in *Orthodoxy, Tradition and Renewal* (Athens: Analogio/Efthyni, 2001), 93–94 [in Greek].

49 G. Florovsky, “Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” *op cit*, 15–16

theology, a renewal that is not yet complete. And “Christian Hellenism” is a type or paradigm of the Church’s relationship to the world and not an “eternal category of Christian existence,” or an unalterable and timeless paragon.

By Way of Conclusion

Of course, the crucial and decisive question that naturally arises from all of the above is if it is possible for there to be an Orthodox theology and tradition that is *not* patristic; if it is possible, in other words, for us to speak within Orthodoxy of a “post-patristic theology” (in both the temporal and normative sense of the term). In the words of Professor Petros Vassiliadis:

Modern Orthodox theology has now reached, in our times, a critical and decisive crossroads in its historical development. For the Orthodox, the 20th century was essentially a period of redefining its self-consciousness through a process of re-discovering the power of the “patristic” tradition. Having discovered the quintessence of its uniqueness in its “liturgical”—i.e., its ecclesiological, Trinitarian, pneumatological, iconological, cosmological, and above all eschatological—dimension, it is now called to take the next step, i.e., to dare to go beyond the traditional “patristic” theology, precisely as the patristic tradition essentially went beyond the primitive Christian tradition, and as the primitive Christian tradition went beyond the Judeo-Christian one. Of course, this does not mean abandoning the spirit or even the style of the patristic era, nor does it involve the rejection of the contemporary Greek philosophical categories of thought that they adopted, but rather it means dynamically transcending them. Indeed, this is the legacy of the great Fathers of the Church.⁵⁰

Another crucial question that arises is whether or not the neo-patristic synthesis and the movement “back to the Fathers” succeeded. To this question the Russian Archbishop of Volokolamsk Hilarion Alfeyev responds, without hesitation, in the negative, citing, among

50 P. Vassiliadis, *Interpretation of the Gospels* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras Publications, 1990), 7 [in Greek].

other things, one objective difficulty that would not permit a positive outcome from the endeavor that Florovsky championed:

In the 20th century the time for such a synthesis had not yet come. It may yet be achieved if we do not abandon the way outlined by the theologians of the 20th century. [...] But another qualitative leap forward is needed in order to build the neo-patristic synthesis upon this foundation, a leap that we, who have entered the 21st century, can make. It is necessary to find a new approach to the fathers, one which would allow us to see the patristic heritage more comprehensively. I am deeply convinced that fundamental and indispensable element of such a new approach should be the logically consistent use of the contextual method of patristic reading.⁵¹

But the problem with Alfeyev's approach is that while he is critical of "defensive" or "protective Orthodoxy," and the subsequent romantic/ahistorical view of patristic theology,⁵² and while he goes so far as to establish an analogy between the Greek fathers' use of ancient philosophy on the one hand, and modern ecclesial theology's use of existentialist philosophy on the other hand,⁵³ he nevertheless seems, in the same text, to hold on to an idealistic view of patristic

51 Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Witness Today* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006), 153. On the use of the contextual method, cf. further in the same book, p. 157: "I believe that solutions may be sought precisely in the consistent use of the principle of the contextual reading of sources, which presumes the capacity of theologians to examine other traditions with the desire to understand rather than to denounce or humiliate them." Inevitably the acceptance of a contextual reading of the Fathers goes together with the non-identification of holy Tradition with Hellenism/Byzantinism, since the former includes, besides the Byzantine, Latin, Syriac, Russian, and other traditions (154–57).

52 Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Witness Today*, op cit, 146–47.

53 Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Witness Today*, op cit, 158: "Like ancient philosophy in the time of Clement of Alexandria and of Origen, so existentialist philosophy may serve—and for many has already served—as a 'pedagogue' towards Christ. Existentialism can be *ecclesialized* in the way that ancient philosophy was ecclesialized by the Greek fathers in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Moreover, the conceptual language of existentialism, which doubtless is closer to persons today than that of the ancient philosophy employed by the Greek fathers, may be used, if not for the formation of a 'neo-patristic synthesis,' then at least for the interpretation of its main elements in the language of our contemporaries."

thought and its relevance to modernity and current issues, as when he declares: “The works of the fathers never lose their relevance, since they deal with questions to which the answers are decisive for the present and future of humanity;”⁵⁴ and this happens because,

the confession of a “patristic faith” not only implies the study of patristic writings and the attempt to bring the legacy of the fathers to life, but also the belief that our era is no less patristic than any other. The “golden age” inaugurated by Christ, the apostles and the early fathers endures in the works of the church fathers of our days.⁵⁵

If the Orthodox theology of the last few decades was inspired and renewed by the call to “return to the Fathers” and its liberation from the captivity of academicism and scholastic theology—without, however, ever managing to avoid its identification with the caricature of traditionalism, patristic archaeology, and confessional entrenchment—today, in the globalized, post-modern pluralistic world, there is a clear and imperative need for a breath of fresh air, for the overcoming of a certain provincialism and complacent introversion within Orthodox theology, for an openness to the ecumenicity of Christianity, to the challenge of religious otherness, and the catholicity of human thought. Theology’s prophetic function calls it to continually transcend itself, to continually transform and renew every kind of established expression and creation—even those inherited from patristic thought—to make a new leap similar or perhaps even greater than what Greek patristic thought needed to make in relation to primitive Christian thought. Is it, perhaps, time for us to realize that fidelity to the patristic tradition, the “We, following the holy Fathers,” does not mean simply the continuation, the update, or even the reinterpretation of this tradition, but rather—following the precedent set by the leaps made by primitive Christianity and the Fathers—the transcendence of patristic

54 Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Witness Today*, op cit, 170. Cf. also his statement: “The counsels of the fathers, I believe, are far more universal than the fundamental postulates of Freudianism and apply to people living in the most diverse cultural and temporal contexts” (170).

55 Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Witness Today*, op cit, 148.

thought when and where it is needed? The “return to the Fathers” was conceived during the 20th century as a “paradigm shift” for Orthodox theology. The question is whether we are now confronting—or if we should confront—a new “paradigm shift” for Orthodox theology today. To do justice to this extremely important and complex question, however, we will need another paper; here, I have only been able to lay out some preliminary considerations.⁵⁶

Faithful to this spirit, we have not attempted to ignore or bypass patristic thought, but to bring it into dialogue with the difficult and provocative questions posed by modernity and late modernity. I believe that the Holy Spirit continues to give us its fruits, and on this basis I believe Orthodox theology today has to attempt to articulate a theological approach to questions that patristic thought did not—or could not—have raised. By doing this I hope to open a new way for modern Orthodox theology, which combines fidelity to tradition with renewal and innovation, boasting in the Lord about the positive things that Orthodox theology has offered up to this time, but also including an element of self-criticism and openness to the future. Primarily, however, I advocate a free space for open-minded dialogue, where all views can be expressed and considered, with respect for the diversity of “the other,” who is an icon of the Other par excellence, God. By publishing my views on the issue of the “*return to the Fathers*” and *on the need for a Modern Orthodox Theology* in the hospitable columns of *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, I don't claim any kind of infallibility, and this is why discussion and criticism are perhaps the most fertile way for me to continue this process.⁵⁷

56 I will explain myself more on the issue of a post-patristic theology on the occasion of the forthcoming international conference on: “Neo-patristic Synthesis or Post-patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology be Contextual?” which will be held between the 3rd and the 6th of June 2010 in Volos (Greece). This conference is organized by the Volos Academy for Theological Studies in collaboration with the Chair of Orthodox Theology at the Centre of Religious Studies (CRS) of the University of Münster (Germany), the Orthodox Christian Studies Program of Fordham University (USA) and the Romanian Institute for Inter-Orthodox, Inter-Confessional and Inter-Religious Studies (INTER, Romania).

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