

# Neo-Traditionalism in Contemporary Orthodoxy

Paul Ladouceur

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Dr Paul Ladouceur  
Orthodox School of Theology at Trinity College,  
University of Toronto.  
Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses,  
Université Laval.  
[123thabor@gmail.com](mailto:123thabor@gmail.com)  
Web: [www.pagesorthodoxes.net](http://www.pagesorthodoxes.net)  
Academia.edu: <https://utoronto.academia.edu/PaulLadouceur>

## *Neo-Traditionalism*

### *in Contemporary Orthodoxy*

Paul Ladouceur

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#### Neo-Traditionalism

This paper sketches out some themes for research on a strong current of contemporary Orthodox thought. As such, many of the statements in this paper are advanced as hypotheses rather than as conclusions flowing from detailed scholarly study.

This paper discusses the current in contemporary Orthodoxy that I call “neo-traditional,” although the followers of this current are also known by a variety of other names, including “fundamentalists,” “rigorists,” “zealots,” “conservatives” and “sectarians.”<sup>1</sup> The appellation “traditionalist” is inappropriate because all Orthodox appeal to tradition, whereas “neo-traditional” implies a novel approach to tradition, which is somehow in tension with long-standing approaches to tradition.

The alternative view of Orthodoxy is more difficult to name or describe, but it sees tradition as living and dynamic, faithful to the essential truths of Orthodoxy, engaged in dialogue with contemporary society and bringing the light of Christ to the modern world. Vladimir Lossky aptly characterised this perspective of Orthodox tradition as “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”<sup>2</sup> The expression “living tradition” is also associated with this view of Orthodoxy, notably in the title of a 1937 volume containing essays by the leading professors of the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris and that of a book by Fr. John Meyendorff.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Two documents of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church of June 2016 (HGC) refer to “fundamentalism.” See the “Message” § 4; and the “Encyclical” § 17. The document on ecumenism, entitled *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*, contains this statement: “The Orthodox Church considers all efforts to break the unity of the Church, undertaken by individuals or groups under the pretext of maintaining or allegedly defending true Orthodoxy, as being worthy of condemnation” § 22. Official documents of the HGC may be accessed at: <[www.holycouncil.org](http://www.holycouncil.org)> (03.10.2016).

<sup>2</sup> Lossky’s essay “Tradition and Traditions” first appeared as the introductory chapter to Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (1952) (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982); reprinted in Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Yonkers NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 141-168; here at 152.

<sup>3</sup> *Zhivoe predanie: pravoslavie v sovremennosti (Pravoslavnaia mysl' 3)* (Living Tradition: Orthodoxy in the Modern World – Orthodox Thought, 3) (Paris: [St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute] & YMCA Press, 1937); reprint: (Moscow: Sviato-Filaretovskaia moskovskaia vysshaia pravoslavno-khristianskaia shkola, 1997); and John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition* (Yonkers NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978).

Opponents often refer to the adherents of this view of Orthodoxy as “liberals,” “modernists” or “renovationists,” all inappropriate and intended as pejorative. Yet this approach to Orthodoxy encompasses the main figures of both the Russian religious renaissance and neopatristic theology.

It is important to stress that the lines between these two currents in Orthodoxy are fluid, with a wide range of gradations between and within each.

My initial contention is that the significance and enduring value of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in June 2016 is severely compromised because of the strength of neo-traditionalism in Orthodoxy. The absence of two local Orthodox churches, Bulgaria and Georgia, can be attributed primarily if not entirely to the adherence of the Holy Synods of these churches to neo-traditionalist theology, especially with respect to ecumenism. The Orthodox Church of Antioch did not attend the Council because of its on-going dispute with the Church of Jerusalem concerning jurisdiction over Qatar. The Orthodox Church of Russia used the non-participation of other Orthodox churches as a pretext for not attending the Council, and it too is subject to neo-traditionalist pressure. Other Orthodox churches, notably those of Cyprus, Greece and Serbia are also under considerable pressure from Orthodox neo-traditionalists, although these churches attended the Council. This is the ecclesial context in which the paper is situated.

### The Origins of Modern Neo-Traditionalism in Orthodoxy

Although Orthodox neo-traditionalists are an amorphous group of hierarchs, clergy and laity, in general terms they view Orthodox tradition as a sacred, immutable, coherent and consistent set of beliefs, precepts and practices, deeply bound to a past golden age of Orthodoxy, often identified with the Byzantine Empire and the Russian imperial regime, and which is to be followed to the letter. They argue that their approach to Orthodoxy is that of the ancient Fathers and even of the apostles themselves.

Neo-traditionalism in twentieth-century Orthodoxy is manifested in *four main strands*.

*The first* emerged among the Russian émigrés in Eastern and Western Europe after the Russian Revolutions of 1917 and the civil war that ensued. In the chaotic situation that prevailed both in Russia and among the Russians in exile, there emerged two ecclesial jurisdictions, one composed of Russian bishops headed by Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) and based in Serbia, and the other headed by Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgiyevsky), based in Paris. Each claimed, with some justification, that it had been legitimately established by saintly Patriarch Tikhon (Georgiyevsky) prior to his death at the hands of the communists in 1925. These jurisdictions reflected different tendencies in the Russian Orthodox Church prior to the Revolution: that headed by Metropolitan Anthony (the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia) was close in outlook to the pre-World War I church hierarchy, integrated into the imperial regime. It was fundamentally conservative, espousing the restoration of the monarchy in Russia, and hierarchical, with little role for lower clergy and laity in the governance of the church.

The jurisdiction of Metropolitan Evlogy reflected the more open or liberal tendency in the Russian Church, and it emerged as the true inheritor of the spirit of the great reform council of the Russian Orthodox Church of 1917-1918. Most of the leaders of the Russian religious renaissance in exile, such as Sergius Bulgakov, Nicholas Berdiaev and Georges Florovsky, were associated with the Evlogy’s jurisdiction in Paris and led the principal theological undertakings

that Evlogy endorsed, the Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute, the publishing house YMCA-Press, and the journal *Put' – The Way*.

The two jurisdictions existed in a state of tension, both nominally under the Moscow Patriarchate but in reality autonomous, until 1927, when Khrapovitsky's jurisdiction broke with Moscow because of the latter's apparent submission to the communist government of the Soviet Union, forming the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia (ROCOR). ROCOR maintained a conservative theological, ecclesial and political stance, criticizing the Moscow Patriarchate as a puppet of communism even after the fall of communism in 1989. Early in the twentieth century, it sought a rapprochement with the Moscow Patriarchate, leading the integration of ROCOR into the Russian Orthodox Church in 2007, while maintaining its separate ecclesial structure abroad. Among the hallmarks of ROCOR over the decades has been a militant opposition to ecumenism, including the participation of the Russian Church in the World Council of Churches.

*The second principal strand of Orthodox neo-traditionalism* can be traced to the decision in 1923 of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Church of Greece and the other non-Slavic Orthodox Churches to adopt the Gregorian or “new” calendar for the celebration of liturgical feasts falling on fixed days of the year. The Church of Russia, unable to make significant decisions at the time, and the Churches of Serbia, Bulgaria and Georgia retained the Julian or “old” calendar. The decision of the Church of Greece to move partially to the New Calendar triggered a schism by members of the clergy and faithful in Greece, who felt that such a decision was a betrayal of Orthodox tradition, since First Ecumenical Council adopted the Julian Calendar in 325, and was a concession to the “evil West,” which had strayed from the true faith and had fallen into heresy, secularism and atheism. As in the case of ROCOR, opposition to all forms of ecumenism is a prominent feature of “Old Calendrist” theology. Although Old Calendrists are a decided minority in Greece, their conservative, neo-traditional mentality is also reflected among members of the hierarchy, lower clergy and faithful in the Church of Greece, with opposition to ecumenism as the main plank in their theological platform.

*A third strand of neo-traditionalist thinking is represented by monasticism.* In the history of Orthodoxy, monks and monasteries have long been regarded as defenders of the purity of the faith, especially in the face of erroneous doctrines circulating in the church and the temptation of the church to integrate itself with secular power structures and wealth. Historical examples of monks defending the integrity of the faith serve as powerful beacons guiding the theology and conduct of major monastic centres, especially Mount Athos. The monasteries of Mount Athos have been very active in Greek politics in recent decades and vociferous in pan-Orthodox affairs. Athos has been a major source of opposition to Orthodox involvement in ecumenism since the 1970s, when the Athonite community objected to the commencement of the theological dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. Most Athonite anti-ecumenical activity has focussed on urging the Ecumenical Patriarchate to withdraw from the ecumenical involvement, and objections to ecumenical overtures, notably contacts and visits between the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Pope. With the exception of one Athonite monastery (Esphigmenou), long under the control of Greek Old Calendrists, opposition to ecumenism has not led to a formal break in communion between Mount Athos and Constantinople.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As of 2016 there is a partial resolution of the Esphigmenou situation, with the bulk of the monastery now under the Ecumenical Patriarch, while the Old Calendrists still control a part of the monastery.

*The fourth strand* is more amorphous than the preceding three, since it is not directly identified with specific historical events or institutions, but rather with individual hierarchs, clergy and theologians. Their starting point is typically a systematic or even strident anti-westernism, highlighting the historical, cultural, theological and socio-political factors which distinguish “the East” and “the West,” and Eastern and Western Christianity, typically ignoring factors which East and West share in common. The conclusion of this historiographic and theological perspective is that Orthodoxy should minimize its contacts with the West, lest it be further affected by unhealthy western values, including secularism, materialism, philosophical, theological and ethical relativism and of course ecumenism.

One factor favouring the rise of neo-traditionalism may be that many Orthodox hierarchs received their theological education mostly from manuals of dogmatic theology typical of the “academic” theology which flourished in pre-revolutionary Russia and in Greece and elsewhere in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For many hierarchs, the theology of the Russian religious renaissance and neopatristic theology remains largely unknown, if not suspect of deviations from Orthodox tradition. While academic theology per se is not necessarily neo-traditionalist, the neo-scholastic rigidly dogmatic tone of the old but still influential manuals of academic theology lends itself to a static rather than a dynamic approach to Orthodoxy, thereby providing a suitable breeding-ground for neo-traditionalism and for anti-intellectualism in general.

The four main strands of neo-traditionalism in Orthodoxy nourish each other, especially in an age when information circulates freely and rapidly through the internet. As a result, they often advance similar theological and ecclesial positions. This is readily evident in neo-traditionalist opposition to the Holy and Great Council, first to the holding of the Council itself, then to those aspects of the pre-conciliar documents which appeared to deviate from a rigorist perspective, especially the ecumenism document (“Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World”).

### Neo-Traditionalist Theology

Earlier expressions of neo-traditionalist theology were notoriously deficient in theological underpinnings. They consisted largely of denunciation (Orthodox institutions and personalities subscribing to Western values and theologies of any sort), conspiracy theories (the evil West plotting to destroy the holy East), apocalyptic visions (catastrophic effects on Orthodoxy ensuing from concessions to Westernism, modernism and ecumenism), and triumphalism (the inherent moral and theological superiority of Orthodoxy over Western Christianity).<sup>5</sup> In recent years, however, the theology of neo-traditionalist thinking has become more elaborate, with appeals to basic principles of classic dogmatic theology, ancient Fathers of the Church and canon law, especially concerning the organization of the Orthodox Church and ecclesial discipline. In the run-up to Council of June 2016 and its immediate aftermath, a number of Greek theologians have been prominent in this respect, notably Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, Demetrios Tselengides, Fr. George Metallinos and Fr. Theodore Zisis, as well as the American Fr. Peter Heers.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example these well-known ROCOR documents: Archbishop Vitaly (Ustinov), “Report to the Sobor of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia” (1967-1968) <[www.roca-sobor.org/eng/ecumenism---a-report](http://www.roca-sobor.org/eng/ecumenism---a-report)> (04.10.2016); and Metropolitan Philaret (Voznesensky), “The First Sorrowful Epistle” (1969) <<http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/sorrow.aspx>> (04.10.2016).

The main theological focus of neo-traditionalist thinking is ecclesiology, especially ecumenism, with important ramifications in sacramental theology and soteriology, typically set in generalised anti-modernism and anti-westernism. The main line of neo-traditionalist ecclesiology runs something like this:

The Orthodox Church is *exclusively* the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ on earth. Since there is but One Christ and One Church, there can be no other church and those Christian bodies which call themselves “church” are in fact not church at all. Having separated themselves from the Orthodox Church by heresy or schism, these bodies no longer possess the sacraments, which subsist only in the Orthodox Church. Thus the rituals carried out by non-Orthodox in imitation of true sacraments are without grace or effect, or (following Augustine), at best they may be valid but not effective, that is, they are not rendered instruments of grace by the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus the baptism administered by non-Orthodox is an empty ritual and does not make its recipients members of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, but instead signifies their membership in some sect or pseudo-church. Their eucharistic rituals may mimic Jesus’ Last Supper with his Holy Apostles, but the bread and wine are not changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, so there is no communion with the risen Lord.

Outside the Orthodox Church, there are only heresies and schisms. The Orthodox Church has never united herself with heresies and schisms but condemns them and prays for the repentance and conversion of heretics and schismatics. Thus the only valid objective of Orthodox contacts with non-Orthodox is to urge them to recognize their errors, to repent and to return to the true Church of Christ.

Christian unity has never been broken, nor could it, because Christ is the one Head of the Church and his Body, the Orthodox Church, cannot be divided. The Orthodox Church has always remained united with her Head, Jesus Christ, as his Body, in keeping with the teachings of the Holy Fathers, the ecumenical councils, the sacred canons and the saints throughout all ages. Thus there is no question of seeking the unity of the Church, only the return of heretics and schismatics to the Orthodox Church.<sup>6</sup>

Few neo-traditionalists carry their thinking to its logical conclusion:

Since non-Orthodox (including of course non-Christians) are not members of the Church, and only the Church possesses and transmits the means of salvation, non-Orthodox are

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<sup>6</sup> As examples of this line of thought, see the pre-conciliar letters of Met. Hierotheos Vlachos: “[First] Letter to the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece on the texts proposed for approval by the upcoming Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church” (January 18, 2016) <[www.pravoslavie.ru/english/90896.htm](http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/90896.htm)> (05.09.2016); “[Second] Letter to the Holy Synod of Greece Concerning Preparations for the Upcoming Great and Holy Council” (January 20, 2016) <[www.pravoslavie.ru/english/90812.htm](http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/90812.htm)> (05.09.2016); “[Third] Letter to the Holy Synod of Greece Concerning the Draft Documents Prepared for the Upcoming Pan-Orthodox Council” (March 5, 2016) <[www.pravoslavie.ru/english/91319.htm](http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/91319.htm)> (05.09.2016); Met. Athanasios of Limassol: “What unity are we talking about? Those who departed from the Church are heretics and schismatics” (February 11, 2016) <[www.pravoslavie.ru/english/90619.htm](http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/90619.htm)> (05.09.2016); “Open letter of the Holy Mount Athos Kinot to the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I” (May 25, 2016) <<http://katehon.com/article/open-letter-holy-mount-athos-kinot-patriarch-constantinople-bartholomew-i>> (03.09.2016); Peter Heers, “The Mystery of Baptism and the Unity of the Church: The Idea of “Baptismal Unity” and its Acceptance by Orthodox Ecumenists” (2004) <[http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/ea\\_ecclesiology.aspx](http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/ea_ecclesiology.aspx)> (05.10.2016); and *The Ecclesiological Renovation of Vatican II: An Orthodox Examination of Rome’s Ecumenical Theology Regarding Baptism and the Church* (Simpsonville SC: Uncut Mountain Press, 2015).

deprived of the means of salvation and thus they cannot enter the Kingdom of God, but are destined for hell.<sup>7</sup>

This line of argumentation contains numerous logical and theological errors,<sup>8</sup> but it is usually presented with sufficient scriptural and patristic proof texts to convince many Orthodox and, as became obvious, the Holy Synods of several local Orthodox Churches, to the point that they not only criticized the pre-conciliar documents, but refused to attend the council on the grounds that the documents, especially ecumenism document, did not contain their views grounded in neo-traditionalist theology.

It is time for Orthodox scholars to take neo-traditionalist theology seriously and stop pretending that it does not exist, or that it is not even worthy of study. Orthodox theologians have not seriously engaged with the narrow and faulty neo-traditionalist theology. There is an urgent need to study and to critique neo-traditionalist theology and also to enter into dialogue with those who might be open to dialogue.

One key to understanding neo-traditionalist theology, possibly the master key, lies firstly in soteriology rather than directly in ecclesiology: Who can be saved? Can only Orthodox be saved? Can Catholics, Protestants and Copts be saved? If not, why not? If so, how are they saved? The answers to these questions will go a long to determining the shape of a corresponding ecclesiology and an ecumenical theology.

Other areas of neo-traditionalist theology also require analysis and comment, for example:

- 1) Seeing the Church as predominantly *a hierarchical institution*, a sort of “hierarchicism,” with women, lay men and even lower clergy barely present and then mainly to support the actions of the hierarchy;
- 2) The invocation of *patristic writings* on any subject as absolute, unerring proof texts resolving all theological issues;
- 3) Appeals to *Orthodox canon law* as though ancient canons relating to ecclesial organization, discipline and conduct were pronouncements of the same weight as dogmas concerning the Trinity, the two natures of Christ and the Mother of God;
- 4) A view of Orthodox spirituality as *mainly if not exclusively monastic*, with no room for spirituality of the laity;
- 5) Accompanying these, *invocations of episcopal and monastic pronouncements* as indisputable and even infallible authorities for Orthodox thought and behaviour;
- 6) Condemnation of *Western thought* in general, including science, especially evolution and modern cosmology, and also democracy, social welfare and human rights – without, of course, depriving oneself of the benefits of western science, technology and economic and

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<sup>7</sup> A meeting of Bulgarian clergy and monastics in February 2016 did carry the argument this far. See “Des Prêtres et moines de l’Église orthodoxe bulgare...” posted on February 23, 2016, on the website <<http://orthodoxie.com/>> (05.09.2016).

<sup>8</sup> My posts under the heading “Ecumenoclasm” on the Public Orthodoxy website critique major aspects of neo-traditional ecclesiology and anti-ecumenical theology: Paul Ladouceur, “Ecumenoclasm: Who Can Be Saved?”; “Ecumenoclasm: What Is Church?”; “Ecumenoclasm: Who Is a Heretic?”; “Ecumenoclasm: Let Us Pray?” <<https://publicorthodoxy.org/tag/paul-ladouceur/>> (04.10.2016).

financial systems, such as cell phones, jet air travel, computers, internet, television, satellites, Western medicine, electricity etc.;

- 7) Appealing to a short list of theological and spiritual heroes because of their bold defence of Orthodoxy against heresies and especially against Western theology, such as St. Photius the Great, St. Gregory Palamas and St. Mark of Ephesus, without differentiating the subtleties of thought in these major figures and the complexities of their relationships with Western Christianity;
- 8) Reliance again on a very short list of modern theologians as bulwarks of neo-traditional theology, especially St. Justin Popovitch, Fr. John Romanides, Fr. Seraphim Rose, certain monastic figures and Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos.

These modern personalities have certainly made significant contributions to the development of contemporary Orthodoxy. But to focus largely or even exclusively on them, and to ignore, deny, or even anathemize or demonize other leading modern Orthodox thinkers, is to distort and misrepresent the main lines of Orthodox thought found in the Russian religious renaissance and neopatristic theology.

### Visibility of the Neo-Traditionalists

In the early twenty-first century the neo-traditionalist view of Orthodoxy is the most prominent and accessible image of the Orthodox tradition, due mainly to the widespread presence of neo-traditionalism on the internet, in the form of web sites, news services, blogs and Facebook groups.

Initially, the main thrust of neo-traditionalists with respect to the Holy and Great Council was to prevent the holding of the council. When it became clear after the Primates' Synaxis in January 2016 that the Council would be held, neo-traditionalists turned their attention to critiquing the pre-conciliar documents, using in particular the internet to relay their views. Criticisms of the ecumenism document in particular became a torrent which carried away the Holy Synods of several local Orthodox churches, already predisposed to anti-ecumenism.

Pro-council Orthodox scholars prepared for Council by the usual scholarly means, mainly conferences and publications. These included notably the conference on "The Forthcoming Council of the Orthodox Church: Understanding the Challenges," held at the Saint Sergius Institute in Paris in October 2012, with proceedings published in *Contacts* and *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*;<sup>9</sup> the Conference of the Orthodox Theological Society of America (OTSA) and the Orthodox Studies Center at Fordham University in Preparation for the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church in June 2015;<sup>10</sup> other posts appearing on the website Public Orthodoxy;<sup>11</sup> and participation in the scholars' meeting convened by the Ecumenical Patriarchate

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<sup>9</sup> Proceedings published in *Contacts, Revue française d'Orthodoxie*, 65, 243 (2013) ("Les enjeux du prochain concile de l'Église orthodoxe"); and *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 60, 1-2 (2016) ("The Forthcoming Council of the Orthodox Church: Understanding the Challenges").

<sup>10</sup> Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA) and the Orthodox Studies Center at Fordham University "Conference in Preparation for the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church"(New York, June 2015) <<https://publicorthodoxy.org/archives/2015-great-and-holy-council-conference/>> (04.10.2016).

<sup>11</sup> See <<https://publicorthodoxy.org/archives/>> (04.10.2016).

in Constantinople in January 2016.<sup>12</sup> It also included an extensive OTSA exercise to comment on the pre-conciliar documents, with the attendant publication of the papers and distribution to those attending the Council.<sup>13</sup>

It can be reasonably postulated that the net effect on the Council of all this scholarly activity was only slightly more than absolute zero.

Stepping out of the pattern of conferences and publications was the last-minute appeal of a large number of Orthodox scholars in favour of the holding of the council, at a moment when there seemed to be a real possibility that the Ecumenical Patriarchate would yield to pressure to postpone the council.<sup>14</sup> This was a noble and laudable undertaking, but perhaps “too little and too late.”

Neo-traditionalist anti-Council activism continued after the Council. Barely a month after the end of the Council, a delegation of Greek neo-traditionalists paid a five-day visit to the Church of Georgia, which included meetings with the Patriarch and the Holy Synod.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of the visit was no doubt to bolster the position of the Church of Georgia against the council and against ecumenism. In mid-September 2016, a very professional anti-council booklet was published in Greece, with essays by Archimandrite Athanasius, the Pro-Igoumenos of Great Meteora, Archpriest Theodore Zisis, and Professor Demetrios Tselengidis.<sup>16</sup>

### Strength of the Neo-Traditionalist Message

Several factors account for the strength of the neo-traditionalist message and the corresponding weakness of a broader vision of Orthodoxy:

- 1) First, the “message” of those espousing a dynamic vision of Orthodoxy is typically abstract and intellectual, often long-winded and even muddled in details, in comparison with the more straight-forward and frequently more emotional appeal of neo-traditionalism, for example, the security of a simple, narrow interpretation of the Orthodox tradition; undifferentiated anti-westernism; appeals to preserve the purity of Orthodoxy; or to ethno-theology.

Neo-traditionalists typically use more popular, less abstract and hence more accessible language than conventional university scholars. They also typically simplify complex issues, reducing them to straightforward statements and affirmations, and usually ignore high-brow counter-arguments.

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<sup>12</sup> See Philip Kariatlis, “Scholars’ Meeting at the Phanar - 4-5 January, 2016” <[www.sagotc.edu.au/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Scholars%E2%80%99%20Meeting.pdf](http://www.sagotc.edu.au/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Scholars%E2%80%99%20Meeting.pdf)> (05.10.2016).

<sup>13</sup> Orthodox Theological Society in America, “Special Project on the Holy and Great Council” <<https://publicorthodoxy.org/archives/otsa-special-project-on-the-great-and-holy-council/>> (04.10.2016).

<sup>14</sup> “An Open Letter of the Orthodox Scholars around the World to the most venerable Primates of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches” (June 12, 2016) <[https://www.orthodoxcouncil.org/-/1-000-orthodox-scholars-urge-the-council-to-be-held-in-june-2016?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_8f5NUGdbszlr\\_languageId=en\\_US](https://www.orthodoxcouncil.org/-/1-000-orthodox-scholars-urge-the-council-to-be-held-in-june-2016?_101_INSTANCE_8f5NUGdbszlr_languageId=en_US)> (28.08.2016).

<sup>15</sup> “Ecclesiastical Delegation from Greece Meets Patriarch and Hierarchs of the Church of Georgia July 25-28, 2016.” <<https://orthodoxethos.com/post/ecclesiastical-delegation-from-greece-meets-patriarch-and-hierarchs-of-the-church-of-georgia>> (26.08.2016).

<sup>16</sup> See “New Publication Dedicated to an Assessment of the Cretan Council: Three Extensive Analyses of the Council and Its Documents” <<https://orthodoxethos.com/post/new-publication-dedicated-to-an-assessment-of-the-cretan-council>> (05.10.2016). The booklet may be downloaded here: <<http://online.fliphtml5.com/scwn/waci/#p=1>> (05.10.2016).

- 2) Secondly, if we apply Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum "The medium is the message," the principal scholarly "medium," academic publications, has a decidedly restricted public, little impact, and usually lags far behind the development of events.

The internet is the preferred medium of anti-traditionalists, resulting in far greater timeliness and visibility of their message, often in many of the major languages used in Orthodoxy, than the vision of Orthodoxy as dynamic and living.

- 3) Thirdly, neo-traditionalists make straightforward appeals to the letter of patristic texts and Orthodox canons to support their positions, especially with respect to contacts with non-Orthodox, ignoring the historical context and continued relevance of ancient texts. Tradition becomes traditionalism.

It is much more difficult to argue otherwise from the spirit and true tradition of Orthodoxy as dynamic and living, responsive to the needs of the people of God and the Church today.

- 4) Fourthly, neo-traditionalism frequently appeals to Orthodox "triumphalism," the assertion of the theological and moral superiority of Orthodox theology, liturgy and spirituality over western equivalents.

Academic theology is generally more restrained and modest in its assertions, seeking to build bridges between East and West, rather than to tear them down.

### An Agenda for Religious Studies Scholars

In studying various aspects of modern Orthodox neo-traditionalism, the expertise of religious studies scholars would be of great benefit. There are, in fact, a number of older studies of neo-traditionalism in Orthodoxy, especially in Greece, where it is often referred to as "rigourism."<sup>17</sup> A number of aspects of neo-traditionalism would likely benefit from investigation by scholars with religious studies backgrounds, including:

1. Assessing the relative strength of neo-traditionalism in the principal countries of Orthodox tradition, and in countries of Orthodox immigration, both among "cradle Orthodox" and among converts;
2. Investigating the relationship between the training and attitudes of Orthodox hierarchs and the rise of neo-traditionalism in recent decades;
3. Understand the psychology of neo-traditionalism, in terms for example of the need to provide personal and group security, a source of pride, a feeling of superiority etc.;
4. Exploring relationships between geo-politics, especially Russian foreign policy, and neo-traditionalism and the Holy and Great Council;
5. Comparing the extent of religious practice and the nature of beliefs of Orthodox faithful with those of other Christians;
6. Assessing the influence of neo-traditionalist and scholarly activities on the Council itself;
7. Assessing the nature and impact of neo-traditionalist activity on the internet.

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<sup>17</sup> See Vasilios Makrides, "Orthodox Christian Rigorism: A Multifaceted Phenomenon" Posted September 6, 2016 <<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2016/09/06/orthodox-christian-rigorism-a-multifaceted-phenomenon/>> (05.10.2016).

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In the first decades of the twenty-first century, neo-traditionalism, especially when combined with ethno-religiosity, has emerged as the greatest threat to Orthodoxy. Neo-traditionalism results not only in the alienation of potential converts, but also of Orthodox themselves, especially younger generations, dismayed by neo-traditionalist positions on modernity, the West and contacts between Orthodox and non-Orthodox, and discouraged by unrealistic social and personal behavioural admonishments of neo-traditionalists. Neo-traditionalism risks reducing Orthodoxy to ethno-cultural ghettos grounded in a religious ideology, not only in countries of Orthodox immigration, but even in historically Orthodox countries, turning tradition into traditionalism and Orthodoxy into orthodoxism, at the margins of Christianity, at a time when Christian unity is required in the face of growing materialism, secularism and anti-Christianism.

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