

The legacy of the Russian Diaspora: an evaluation and future directions

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Abstract

A century after the Russian Revolution, the event that caused the migration of Russian intellectuals and theologians to the West, we may evaluate the contribution of that generation to Orthodox theology as well as to wider Christian theology. This article looks into theological areas such as apophaticism, mystical theology, ecclesiology and the neopatristic turn, trying to discern the impact of the theologians of the Russian diaspora today.

It has been just over a century since the Russian Revolution, undoubtedly one of the most significant historical events of the twentieth century. While this was primarily a political event, and its more immediate result was the creation of an international political and military polarity that lasted for over 70 years, it generated ripples within Russian thought and culture beyond the political sphere—including modern Orthodox thought, as well as Christian thought in a broader sense. In terms of theological thought, we can see that several of the Russian intellectuals who moved to Western Europe and America as a result of the Russian Revolution articulated some theological views that made the understanding of the depth of the Orthodox theological tradition surprisingly clear—something unprecedented in modern times. While the influence of the Russian theologians who migrated to the West is undeniable, a century after the seminal event that set in motion what may be described as an explosion in Orthodox theology, we will now take a look into the legacy of that generation and reflect on what it means for us today.

The Russian Revolution was a complex political and social phenomenon which, along with its intended targets of political change in Russia, also put into motion a rather unexpected series of events that affected the Western world. The emigration of large populations of Russians from different layers of Russian society with different skills, levels of education, interests, and familiarity with the Western world, was far from a homogenized phenomenon. Perhaps the majority of those people were assimilated quietly, even if they maintained their language and customs for as long as they lived. From this point of view, Russian communities in the West, as many other immigrant communities, contributed in an indirect way to the emergence of the multicultural society with which we are much more familiar now in the West. They built parishes and churches that still remain today, and are part of the increasing number of denizens who trace their ethnic origin elsewhere. For the ones among those immigrants, however, who had intellectual, artistic, and theological interests, migration to the West was, despite its hardships, a chance to develop, flourish, and expand well beyond their former boundaries. People such as Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Nabokov, Sorokin, Struve, Kandinsky, and Chagall, to mention just a few, infused the Western world at all levels of the Arts and Sciences and left their mark. Quite impressively, the philosophers and theologians among that generation that we usually associate with the Russian Diaspora were an exceptionally significant group and left one of the most fruitful and far-reaching legacies.

One of the main challenges that immigrants often face is the question of their identity—usually with reference both to the land they left behind and the land they settled in. Russian philosophers and theologians, whose thought up to that point was formulated in the context of their Slavic and Orthodox culture, struggled more and more deeply with the question of identity than other Russian immigrants to the West. We can appreciate this point if we look into the question, or rather the formative power, of cultural identity in the work of

the painter and iconographer Leonid Ouspensky in parallel with the formative period of someone who may be rightfully considered his Greek counterpart, Fotis Kontoglou.¹ What is impressive in the parallel trajectories of these artists is that they both developed their artistic identities as exiles from their land of birth within the context of the lively Parisian artistic milieu, at the same time adopting some and rejecting other of its elements. The result was a return to their respective traditions in a much more nuanced way than ever seen before in their respective motherlands. In both cases we can talk about the pursuit of a cultural identity that was formed in dialogue, both with the Western world and with the native traditions these artists served. In addition to their artistic skill, which would have given them some recognition and success in any generation, both Kontoglou and Ouspensky stand out because their unique position of operating within their tradition in an alien cultural context allowed them (or perhaps forced them) to capture and express the essence of that tradition in a way that encouraged a meaningful dialogue with the alien culture but also allowed them to renew their tradition.

This seems to me an apt model to understand the entire wave of theological thought of the Russian Diaspora. We can observe here the pursuit of a spiritual identity as a general phenomenon that was based on the tradition of the land they left behind but could at the same time be articulated using robust theological and philosophical terms, so that it could make sense in the context of the tradition of the land that became their new home. This we may ascribe in varying degrees to the representatives of the Russian Diaspora, as some, such as Bulgakov, were more directly interested in themes that emerged in Russia before the revolution (such as sophiology), while others, such as Lossky, were able to use systematic

¹ Cf. my chapter ‘Φώτης Κόντογλου — Λεονίντ Ουσπένσκυ: Βίοι Παράλληλοι’, in Χρήστος Μαργαρίτης (ed.), *Φώτης Κόντογλου: Από τον Λόγο στην Έκφραση* (Athens, Benaki Museum, 2015), 123–32.

language that was familiar to Thomists and medievalists in order to express distinctly Orthodox ideas.

The pursuit of identity, of course, is usually the challenge of the integration of the immigrant in general. The spirituality of the Russian Diaspora, as the spirituality of an immigrant (and perhaps somewhat elitist) community, was very much defined by the concern of an Orthodox Christianity that discovers its roots in order to articulate its voice in a way that makes sense to a cultural and theological context beyond its own. The result was noticeable both beyond Orthodoxy, since this was the first time after many centuries that there was a meaningful dialogue with Western theologians, and also within Orthodoxy, since the dialogue necessitated a fresh development of many areas of Orthodox theology.

Since then, the world of ideas has become more complex, more open, and more multicultural. The question of the identity of the (individual) immigrant is still relevant as migration for all sorts of reasons is still taking place on a massive scale today; however, as many ethnic communities have become part of the wider social context of the Western world, we can also add the question of the place of individual spiritualities in a globalized world and their dialogue with the surrounding culture. This is quite important because it allows us to approach the spiritual tradition of Orthodox Christianity in (at least relative) independence from the ethnic cultures that have historically been associated with it in the past and thus explore its ecumenical and apostolic dimension.

In many ways this is one of the things I personally find quite fascinating about the Russian Diaspora. I often found the parcelling of Greek and Russian culture under the umbrella of Orthodoxy somewhat problematic inasmuch as this expresses a claim to a shared culture as the basis for a shared spirituality. Despite sharing the same spiritual and theological tradition, as a person who grew up in the Mediterranean, I am not very touched by narratives

of memories from the Russian Steppe; the Ionian Sea of my youth is too different. The metaphysics of the Aegean that my generation came to know through the poetry of Elytis is very different from the wet, dark imagery of the Russian forest; and the dignified humility of the Papadiamandic village is not really compatible with the pretensions of an imperial family with spiritual claims, both before and after its demise. Russian culture is too cold, too intoxicated, and too dark for my Greek disposition. But this is a problem only if we take the connection between culture and spirituality too far, or rather if the cultural expression of spirituality becomes the normative way to talk about things that transcend human experience. This is precisely where the Russian Diaspora, and the nuance of its pursuit for a cultural and spiritual identity, encouraged us to understand Christianity through and ultimately beyond our cultural limitations.

Here, however, I would like to take a look at a number of themes from the theological legacy of the Russian Diaspora, a hundred years after the key events that set history in motion in order to consider the extent of their effect today. One of the Russian Diaspora's greatest contributions has probably been the (re)discovery of the language of mystical and apophatic theology, which, although part of the Orthodox tradition for a long time, was marginalized by positivist theology both in Greece and in Russia. While Greece, the Balkans and the Near East were, for the most part, under Turkish occupation until the nineteenth century and therefore did not have the freedom to continue the high-level philosophical and theological discourse of the past, Russian theological culture after Peter the Great followed a decisively Western-oriented direction, where even the language of theological instruction for a long time was Latin.² Dionysios the Areopagite, Maximos the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas were not read, even by the Orthodox, for many centuries, despite exceptions such as that of

² Cf. Ekaterina I. Kislova, "“Latin” and “Slavonic” Education in the Primary Classes of Russian Seminaries in the 18th Century", *Slověne: International Journal of Slavic Studies* 4.2 (2015): 72–91.

Nikodemos the Hagiorite, who managed to include some of the works of Palamas in the Philokalia. Mainstream theologians of the early twentieth century such as Balanos, Androutsos, and Trembelas either ignored the Palamite tradition or shared the negative attitude that Western theology had towards it at the time. The reversal of this situation and the rediscovery of the language of apophaticism and of Gregory Palamas in our times, at least within academic theology, certainly started from within the Russian circles that became associated with the diaspora.

Having said this, despite the relevant volumes that have been written in the last few decades, we are still trying to get our bearings in understanding the apophatic ascetic tradition. For a number of modern theologians, such as Denys Turner, apophatic theology means the same as negative theology (i.e., a theology of logical extrapolation) by which we approach God by gradually eliminating all the categories that attempt to describe him.³ This, I believe, is not a very satisfactory direction because a series of negative arguments may help deconstruct several layers of misconceptions and even ontologically-mitigated preconceptions that limit our view of the divine, but it is not sufficient, by itself, to lead to any meaningful insight. The elimination of all rationalist categories may lead to an abstract, philosophically induced conception of God, but it can equally lead to nihilism as it does not, as a series of philosophical eliminations, offer something else instead. This understanding of apophaticism, or rather, this attempt to define apophaticism in the lines of an epagogic process of philosophical elimination, is still very prevalent, even among Orthodox scholars. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware for instance, often describes apophaticism in his sermons as a divine prohibition, a command to abandon the pursuit of penetrating the mystery of God due to the limitations of human nature. Similar to the Biblical prohibition of Moses, who was not

³ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

allowed to see the face of God (Exodus 33:20), Metropolitan Kallistos often mentions the grim instruction one finds at the end of a train platform: ‘Do not go further’. Yet, although this expressive image can speak to the impossibility of approaching God using the apparatus of rationalist gnosiology, it does not say much about the nature and the wisdom of this prohibition, or about whether it is possible to approach God in different ways.

On the other hand, there are also theologians such as Christos Yannaras for whom apophaticism signifies the impossibility of processing the experience of the revelation of the divine nature (either in the form of a beatific vision or in the sense of the liturgical experience of the Church) in linguistic and rational terms. Apophaticism here is an expression of freedom from rationalism, and an expansion of the limits of being.⁴ In addition, Nikolaos Loudovikos, more recently, has approached apophaticism in the context of the sacramental life of the Church.⁵ Such directions present, I believe, a more mature understanding of apophaticism, which may be not found with such clarity among the earlier theologians who nevertheless turned our attention to it, such as Vladimir Lossky. Apophaticism as an expression of the distance between individual or shared experience and language has much potential, as it touches on a philosophical problem of great interest among deconstructionist postmodernists who explore the limits of language and rationality. If apophaticism may be understood as the silence of language and rationalism in the face of the overwhelming experience of the presence of God, I believe that a much more appropriate image for it is that of the Orthodox priest in the Great Entrance of the Presanctified Liturgy, which is carried out in complete silence while his face is covered by a veil during the procession. This silence

⁴ Cf. Christos Yannaras, *Ἐξί φιλοσοφικῆς ζωγραφιῆς* (Ἀθήνα: Ἴκαρος, 2011), esp. 32.

⁵ Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Church in the Making: An Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2015).

suggests a definite presence, the presence of the Eucharistic body of the Lord (already sanctified and brought forth as such in a previous service) among the people.

But while the development of apophaticism and its relationship with modern thought seems promising, it is harder to say the same about mysticism. The contribution of the Russian diaspora in the way mysticism is understood today has been quite interesting. It is possible to see two different directions here, not always compatible with each other. On the one hand mysticism has been expressed through charismatic saintly figures, something featured quite strongly in the Russian tradition, which may be seen in the influence of the solitary pilgrim, elder, or self-proclaimed mystic that came to a dramatic exaggeration in the case of Rasputin, who is often remembered as a monk, a clergyman, a spiritual father, or a pilgrim, although the only factual basis of this was simply that he spent a couple of years as a wanderer. He had no monastic profession nor clerical ordination. In spite of this, he was habitually referred to as ‘Fr Grigori’ by his followers, including members of the Imperial family. Mysticism of this kind falls subject to Dostoyevsky’s much discussed criticism of the unholy triad of miracle, mystery, and authority⁶ expressed by the Grand Inquisitor, in Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*.

The other direction given to us by the Russian diaspora, especially Vladimir Lossky, was the attempt to consider mysticism in the context of our spiritual and theological language. It is true that Lossky’s monumental *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (published in French in 1944) is in practice an attempt towards an Orthodox systematic theological textbook, which touched on most of the *topoi* of modern Orthodox theology. In this way he responded to some of the difficulties posed by the generation of the Russian

⁶ Cf. Gwenaëlle Aubry, “‘Miracle, Mystery and Authority’”: a Deconstruction of the Christian Theology of Omnipotence’, *MLN* 132.5 (2017): 1327–50.

religious renaissance which, from Lossky's perspective, had been not careful enough with its systematic theological language, at the same time opening a dialogue with the Western theological tradition. Yet, in his attempt to use concepts that would be meaningful within a Western theological context, Lossky's understanding of mysticism, or the 'mystical union', is informed by the same 'mystical individualism' from which he tries to keep some distance.⁷

The problem here starts with how we define and understand mysticism. Even among several Orthodox theologians, mysticism in the last few centuries, especially after the interest in the beatific vision—defined by Thomas Aquinas as directly seeing the divine essence and as the expected culmination of the ascetic ascent⁸—is understood as a private encounter with the divine, as a beatific vision that essentially defines and confirms sainthood. This is not consistent with the way mysticism was understood in antiquity, where the etymology of the word refers to a sacramental initiation, as well as in early Christianity, where *μυστήριον* refers to the sacrament, and mystical theology, as in the work of Dionysios the Areopagite, essentially means liturgical theology. The pursuit and the expectation of private vision, on the other hand, so much mistrusted by the early Desert Fathers, implies a fideistic approach whose theological background is consistent with a (largely Roman Catholic) view of the miracle (and the vision) as a confirmation of the existence and the power of God, but also of the holiness of the beholder,⁹ something that makes further ascetic struggle unnecessary. Fideistic mysticism thus becomes the grave of ascetic ascent.

⁷ Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1976), 20–21.

⁸ *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 3, a. 8 and elsewhere, also cf. Robert Llizo, 'The Vision of God: St. Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision and Resurrected Bodies', *Perichoresis* 17.2 (2019): 19–26.

⁹ In this way we may also consider the famous incident of the transfiguration of Seraphim of Sarov, written by Nikolai Motovilov. What may be questioned here is not the person of Seraphim himself, but the authenticity of Motovilov, a person with a troubled mental record, who dedicated much of his time and energy to the canonization of Seraphim. Motovilov's narrative of Seraphim's miraculous transfiguration tries precisely to make the case about his personal holiness. Even if the truthfulness of the event itself is not challenged, the motives of Motovilov in writing this down may be questioned. In contrast, Jesus, after his Transfiguration,

Something very similar was actually discussed in the generation right after Gregory Palamas, as the Church was struggling to remove any suspicion of Massalianism from hesychastic theology, which seems to have been a considerable concern at the time. People such as Theophanes of Nicea, talking about the Thaboric light and the sacraments, stressed the understanding of the mystical as mystagogical and liturgical, and contrasted it with the private solitary ascent of the one to the One (to use the expression of Plotinus). Theophanes made a clear distinction between the private *μέθεξις*, which is neither shared nor verifiable, and the collective, sacramental *κοινωνία*, which refers to a shared experience of the presence of God.¹⁰ This, of course, is a much older question. If we want to consider it in a wide context, we may notice that while the earliest examples of ascetic ascent (such as the ascent of Moses in Philo, or even the ascent of St Paul to the third heaven) were perhaps closer to the Platonist model of the individual ascent as well as the individual Hebrew *merkavah* (both of which may indeed be considered similar to the Massalian tradition), there is a gradual shift towards a more strongly embodied and collective understanding of the presence of God. While the ascent of Moses on Sinai in Philo is expressed in the context of the Platonist ascent of the (individual) soul, the same narrative in Gregory of Nyssa refers to the ascent of the soul and the ascent of the church community at the same time; and finally, in Dionysios the Areopagite it refers to the liturgical entrance of the celebrant to the altar. It was only after the explosion of hesychasm that the theology, truth, and context of the vision of light was examined more carefully in the Orthodox Church.

instructed Peter, John and James to not mention what they saw until after his death and Resurrection (Mt 17:9; Mk 9:9; Lk 9:36).

¹⁰ X. Σωτηρόπουλος (ed.), *Θεοφάνους Γ' Ἐπισκόπου Νικαίας Περί Θαβωρίου Φωτός, Λόγοι Πέντε* (Athens, 1988).

Now, while we owe to Russian theologians, or more precisely, to the dialogue between Martin Jugie and the theologians of the Russian diaspora,¹¹ the modern rediscovery of Palamas,¹² we can see that for a long time Russian theologians were not so much interested in the work of Palamas in its entirety, much of which remains untranslated to this day. In Greek, the critical edition was produced over several years by Panagiotis Chrestou¹³ and, more recently, this task is still being carried out in English by Christopher Veniamin.¹⁴ They were rather interested in what became known as Palamism. Russian theologians up to and including Meyendorff almost exclusively saw Palamas as the theologian of the charismatic visual experience, the author of the *Triads*, and they largely ignored the rest of his work, which is much more Christological and Mariological in nature and also includes diverse works, such as an attempt towards an interreligious dialogue with Islam.¹⁵

The Greek reception of hesychasm and Palamas, both before and after the twentieth-century contribution of the Russian theologians, has a slightly different flavour than it does in Russian theology and practice. Hesychasm may have originated in the Egyptian desert and may have later found its theological expression by Greek theologians, but it probably became more widespread in Russia than it did in Egypt and Greece. While the Jesus prayer is

¹¹ Norman Russell has explored effectively the background and the gradual introduction of Gregory Palamas in Russian thought, as well as his re-introduction in Greek thought. Russell points out that much of the reception of the thought of Palamas in the 20th century has to do with what he calls ‘Orthodox identity politics’: Norman Russell, *Gregory Palamas and the Making of Palamism in the Modern Age*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

¹² While it is true that the first modern study on Gregory Palamas was published by Gregory Papamichael in 1911 (*Ο Άγιος Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς* [Alexandria, 1911]), before the publications of Bishop Basil Krivocheine, it was based on Papamichael’s dissertation at the Russian Theological School of St Petersburg, written a few years earlier.

¹³ Παναγιώτης Χρήστου (ed.), *Άγιου Γρηγορίου Παλαμά, Συγγράματα*, 5 volumes (Θεσσαλονίκη: Κυρομάνος, 1966–1992).

¹⁴ Christopher Veniamin (ed. and trans.), *Mary the Mother of God: Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas* (Dalton, PA: Mt Thabor Publishing, 2005); *The Saving Work of Christ: Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas* (Dalton, PA: Mt Thabor Publishing, 2008); *On the Saints: Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas* (Dalton, PA: Mt Thabor Publishing, 2008); *The Parables of Jesus: Sermons by Saint Gregory Palamas* (Dalton, PA: Mt Thabor Publishing, 2013).

¹⁵ ‘Διάλεξις προς Χιόνας’, in Παναγιώτης Χρήστου (ed.), *Άγιου Γρηγορίου Παλαμά, Συγγράματα*, vol. 4 (Θεσσαλονίκη: Κυρομάνος, 1988), 120–65.

certainly known and practiced among Greek monks and laity, it is not considered the most normative practice in Greek monasticism; or to say this more correctly, with rare exceptions, such as the monastery of John the Baptist in Essex, UK (whose spiritual roots are Russian, nevertheless), the Jesus prayer does not normally replace the daily cycle of liturgical prayers. It is practiced privately, and it is not seen as the apex of spiritual life. Certainly among modern Greek theologians, the spiritual orientation is more Eucharistic than charismatic, although this is mostly a question of emphasis rather than of systematic pre-eminence.

In the Greek tradition, there was an attempt to moderate the power of the individual experience and combine it with philosophical theology, despite the argument of Palamas himself that ‘philosophy does not save’. Yet, the immediate as well as the long-term reception of Palamite mysticism involved two significant limits. The biography of Palamas, written by Philotheos Kokkinos¹⁶ several years after his death, starts with two events that nobody would have been able to remember more than sixty years after they took place, but seem specifically included there in order to give the reader the framework within which Palamism should be understood. The first is Theodoros Metochites’ praise of Gregory for his understanding of Aristotelian philosophy. The point here is that the theological perspective of Palamism is understood as an extension of classical philosophy rather than as its simplistic negation. The second incident mentioned by Kokkinos is his conversion of the Massalians of Mt Papikion on his way to Mt Athos. The point in this case is a pre-emptive condemnation of Massalianism and the pursuit of the charismatic, transcendental experience that ignores the sacraments, an accusation that had been levied against Palamas by Barlaam.

¹⁶ Παναγιώτης Χρήστου (ed.), *Φιλοθέου Κόκκινου, Βίος του Γρηγορίου Παλαμά* (Θεσσαλονίκη: Πατερικές εκδόσεις Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς, 2009).

To return to our concern on mysticism as it has been approached at least since Lossky in the East, we can observe that the basis for its modern understanding, influenced by the Thomist perspective, relies much more on the individual, charismatic experience that could only exceptionally be found in the Eastern roots of spirituality, and, despite all the rhetoric for hesychasm and the theology of Gregory Palamas as a guarantee of an Orthodox pedigree, the experience of the Uncreated Light was contextualized more clearly within the sacramental context of Orthodox theology and practice. The thought of the theologians of the Russian diaspora indeed broached on mysticism and can, perhaps, be clarified and developed further, perhaps as one of the last victims of Florovsky's theological pseudomorphosis.

Another theological *topos* introduced by the Russian diaspora is the study of ecclesiology within Orthodox theology, a theological strand that does not appear as such before the nineteenth century, and yet has largely dominated Christian theological thought of the twentieth century. Afanasiev's study of the Church certainly provided a lot of clarity in terms of the balance of the One and the Many.¹⁷ And yet, the introduction of ecclesiology as a distinct category of theology created about as many problems as it attempted to solve. To be fair to Afanasiev, his *Church of the Holy Spirit* posits, in no uncertain way, the Eucharistic foundation of ecclesiology, and it explores how this Eucharistic dimension spreads over and embraces all the members of the Church, clergy, and laity. Although Afanasiev's thought does not make a strong connection with Patristic thought (Dionysios is almost absent from his thought, while Maximos and Kabasilas are completely absent), he looked into early Christianity (such as the *Didache*, which he placed next to the New Testament in terms of the

¹⁷ While his main work, *The Church of the Holy Spirit* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), was published in English many years after his death, it is largely acknowledged that Afanasiev's thought had been circulated widely long before then, and had had a significant impact among the theologians of his generation for decades, cf. Ambrose Mong, *Purification of Memory: A Study of Orthodox Theologians from a Catholic Perspective* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015), esp. chapter 2, which is dedicated to Nicholas Afanasiev.

information they both offer about the early Church, following Harnack¹⁸) and also provided a basis for much ecclesiological reflection that followed, both in the West and in the East. Nevertheless, the exploration of Ecclesiology has not been exhausted, at least if we compare and contrast modern ecclesiological theory and practice.

The moment we started asking the question ‘what is the Church?’ is also the moment we started asking ‘what is not the Church?’ Since the answer to these questions, especially to the second, could not be left to the mostly empirical approach of the distant past (empirical in the sense that every community could have a clear sense of self-definition), it acquired an increasingly legalistic character. Similar questions, which have been plaguing Christianity for centuries, are ‘What is the “genuine” Church?’, and, with increasing frequency, especially in the age of blog theology, ‘What should I do if I discover that my Church is not the genuine one?’ And also, a related question, ‘Who is the head of the Church? How limited or absolute is his power?’ There is no current consensus on this, except to admit that the Papal (Western) system has failed to preserve the unity of the Church, but the Imperial (Eastern) system has also failed, while Protestant theology has given up completely on the need for a Christian sacramental unity/union—perhaps so that the question of this primordial unity can emerge separated from the question of authority.

We could add a series of problems that have not been addressed sufficiently in the Orthodox Church. For example, there is the problem of ethnophyletism, which although repudiated theologically and repeatedly condemned, is still a harsh reality from which the Orthodox Church does not seem able to escape (and is related to the lack of a clear figure of a *primus*). An additional problem is the distance between the bishop and the priest, which takes away the emphasis on the celebration of the Eucharist, despite the lip service paid to it, in

¹⁸ Afanasiev, *Church of the Holy Spirit*, 87.

favour of a strongly administrative bishop. While Afanasiev and his successors noted the historical transition from the senior presbyter to the bishop and commented on how this transition affected the early Church,¹⁹ it is hard to ignore that this problem has worsened in our days, with no clear view as to how it could be addressed.²⁰

This difficulty of a lack of a common ecclesiological language has been manifested at the higher levels of church life. As we saw in the 2016 Council of Crete, the theological definition of the Church as the body which includes the entire sacramental presence of Jesus Christ has led to claims of exclusivity and exclusion that did not exist before, at least not in this way. More time and energy were spent in Crete trying to address the question of how to refer to non-Orthodox Christian denominations than to more urgent theological and pastoral issues. Could this possibly mean that the initial attempt to systematize the language of the Fathers on the subject of ecclesiology did not anticipate the claims of exclusivity it led to? Would it be possible to step back from a century of ecclesiology and seek a different entry point? After all, the Patristic corpus on ecclesiology is impressively small, indicating that the Fathers did not try to address this question in a systematic way.

Interestingly, the one Father who dedicated a significant part of his work to the study of the sacraments and the structure of the celestial and the earthy Church is the one who used the persona of a character from the first century, quite possibly in order to extricate himself from the theological conversation of his time, possibly as a protest for the abstract direction theology was taking at the time. If we read Dionysios the Areopagite in this way, we can understand his entire work as an attempt to escape and denounce the post-Chalcedonian climate of division and opposition, where theological *signifiers* were rapidly losing their

¹⁹ Afanasiev, *Church of the Holy Spirit*, 217–54.

²⁰ Cf. Dimitrios Bathrellos, ‘Church, Eucharist, Bishop’, in Douglas Knight (ed.), *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 133–46. Bathrellos is developing this point even further in a forthcoming article.

empirical connection from their *signifieds*. In Dionysian thought, ecclesiology is the study of the sacraments, as we can see it in his two *hierarchies* (something that has remained unchanged all the way to Nikolaos Kabasilas, who distinguished sacraments from rational symbols in relation to the Church²¹), or the language of doxology, wherever it may come from, as we see it in *Divine Names*, or the language of the transcendence of rationality, as we see in the *Mystical Theology*. Dionysios does touch on the question of the authority of the bishop and the priest, but the base of that authority is not administrative jurisdiction; it is sacramental clarity, the kind of clarity that allows the light of God to pass through. Perhaps it is there, and in the equally sacramental *Mystagogy* of Maximos the Confessor that we could look for the roots of a liturgical ecclesiology²² that may take away some of the emphasis on ethnic and jurisdictional divisions. Our current definitions of the Church have not made provision for the fragmented Christianity we experience—something more evident in Orthodoxy in the West—and the most moderate Orthodox response to the question of whether to call non-Orthodox Christian bodies churches or not is neither very clear nor very theological. At any rate, perhaps the Patristic and sacramental exploration of the roots of ecclesiology, along with the challenges the Orthodox Church faces in the modern world, will force it out of a cocoon of theological inactivity and into a more daring theological exploration of the unknown.

But perhaps the most lasting among the directions the Russian diaspora opened for us was that which came about as a reaction to the earlier phase of Russian religious philosophical theology: the return to the Fathers and the neopatristic synthesis. This, in short,

²¹ Nikolaos Kabasilas, *Ερμηνεία εις την Θείαν Λειτουργίαν*, 38:6.

²² Such as explored by Andrew Louth in his article ‘The Ecclesiology of Saint Maximos the Confessor’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 4.2 (2004): 109–20, as well as in several of the works of Nikolaos Loudovikos, such as *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010).

encapsulates the quite intense dialogue between Sergei Bulgakov on the one hand and Vladimir Lossky and Georges Florovsky on the other. In fact, most of the writings of Lossky and Florovsky are responses or reactions to the thought of Bulgakov.

Georges Florovsky was rightly concerned with the alienation of Orthodox theology during its Babylonian captivity,²³ the period when Russian theology lost its intellectual depth after the forced change of Russian culture and ecclesiastical structure by Peter the Great, while at the same time the Greek church was struggling to survive under the Ottoman rule. During that time, Orthodox theology slipped into using Western theological language, which for the most part was not understood correctly and was not really integrated with Orthodox thought. This is a condition from which Orthodox theology has not yet fully recovered.²⁴ Florovsky used ‘pseudomorphosis’²⁵—a term that, as Andrew Louth has demonstrated,²⁶ was borrowed from the study of minerals and refers to an element that appears as something that it is not—in order to describe the illness, and presents the return to the theology and the mindset of the Fathers as the cure.

While his historical observations cannot be disputed, there are several difficulties with the idea of the return to the Fathers. First, which Fathers? The Philokalia, the most recent collection of Patristic writings, still influential today, was compiled during a time when Western theological views and attitudes had already become part of Eastern theology—not so

²³ Cf. Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, Collected Works Vol. 5, 121. It is interesting that while Florovsky believed this Babylonian captivity began with Peter the Great’s reforms, he saw Bulgakov’s sophiology as the more recent expression of that Westernization which needed to be eradicated.

²⁴ As an example of this we may refer to the implicit adoption of the idea of seven sacraments by the Orthodox Church, something that does not exist in Orthodox thought; in the sacramental theology of Dionysios the Areopagite for instance, we find references to only three sacraments. In addition, in a deeper theological sense one could argue, as John Zizioulas has done, that the entire sacramental life of the Church flows from the one sacrament of the Eucharist.

²⁵ Florovsky, 5, 37, 72, 84, and 121.

²⁶ Andrew Louth, ‘The Authority of the Fathers in the Western Orthodox Diaspora in the Twentieth Century’ in Archimandrite Job Getcha & Michel Stavrou (ed.), *Le Feu sur la terre. Mélanges offerts au Père Boris Bobrinskoy pour son 80e anniversaire*, (Analecta Sergiana 3) (Paris: Presses Saint-Serge, 2005), 169–76.

much in the sense of expressing Western ideas (although one of its two editors, Nikodemos the Hagiorite also translated to Greek the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola and the *Spiritual Combat* of Lorenzo Scupoli), but in that it posits a personal monastic asceticism, largely ignoring Patristic texts on the communion of the Church or on love. It can hardly be thought of as a systematic Patristic syllabus, as it does not include important Fathers such as Basil the Great and Dionysios the Areopagite, and the word ‘church’ is mentioned only three times in the entire compilation. The impression one gets from this collection is that its aim is to demonstrate that since the world in which we live has fallen to the Ottomans, and since the Church as a powerful institution has collapsed, it is not easy to speak of salvation in this world, and therefore we could try to think of salvation as an anchoretic escape, in a way perhaps even more extreme than we can find in the early Desert Fathers. The *Tale of the Pilgrim*, a text that expresses the reception of the Philokalia in the Slavic world, crystallizes this idea quite clearly, as it exemplifies the mendicant lifestyle of the titular pilgrim; it is mostly a personal journey, where the abandonment of the community is seen as a higher calling than belonging to it.

The second question to consider in this context is ‘How do we read the Fathers?’ When we refer to ‘the Fathers’ we mean writings that easily cover fifteen centuries, from different parts of the Christian world, addressing different theological or pastoral needs. It is extremely misleading to imply a consistency of language, purpose, or methodology in the Patristic corpus. Even the same writer may use different approaches if a different audience needs to be addressed; Gregory Palamas, for instance, spoke in a very different way to the Muslims who captured him in 1354 than to his monks at Esphigmenou. To compound this problem, we do not write theology in the same way today, where for the most part our theological language is that of a disembodied, reified apodictic philosophy rather than the language of revelation and compassion. Nevertheless, one of the unintended results of the

emphasis on the Fathers is a temptation to think of ‘the mindset’ and the thought of the Fathers as a solid body of legal information, clothed within a cloak of objective authority second only to Scripture—a ‘sin’ heavier than the Protestant elevation of the Biblical text to an inerrant, literal, absolute and exclusive measure of the truth—since the same reification of the text is not refuted, but it is extended to the Patristic texts. Unfortunately, at least if we consider lay Orthodox theological voices as they are expressed in the blogosphere, but also much of modern formal theology, we simply do not read the Fathers correctly when we try to find in them the reified, inerrant ultimate authority that the Orthodox Church has denied both to the Pope and to Scripture. The Fathers need to be interpreted constantly and read dynamically as ‘theological icons’ in a ‘symphony’ of voices throughout time.²⁷

Florovsky, of course, was an exceptionally distinguished Patrologist, but the point here is less about the ‘correct’ Fathers or the sources that could be used as antidotes to the pseudomorphosis and more about the sad realization that we have lost our continuity with our own tradition, that we cannot trust Orthodox spirituality as it was handed to us by the previous generation. We therefore need to look back to a golden era of our theology in order to rediscover our roots. Here, however, we can see a strong parallel with the Western world. This was precisely the disappointment of the Protestant reformers when they realized that their own tradition had been corrupted by the power-hungry Papacy, and they looked to the origins of Christianity as the golden era they could trust. In both cases we can see that (the immediate) tradition is abandoned, in favour of what is considered a probably arbitrarily chosen golden age of theological thought. It is interesting here to note that different traditions have different ideas about what may be considered an ecclesiastical golden age. While for

²⁷ Both terms are taken from John Behr, ‘Patristic Texts as Icons’, in Andreas Andreopoulos & Graham Speake (eds.), *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: Studies in Honour of Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 151–70.

most Protestants this is the time before the Church was consolidated into an international structure, for the Catholic Church it is usually the time of a strong Renaissance Papacy, and for the Orthodox Church the golden age is, unquestionably, a reminiscence of the strong Byzantine Empire. In this light, the neopatristic turn may be considered as a light Reformation, too light to cause a schism in the Orthodox Church (perhaps precisely pseudomorphic theology and practice is still very much present in Orthodoxy today), but then again too light to manage to shake the Orthodox Church out of its own Dark Ages and question some of its cultural assumptions (Byzantinisms or Russianisms) seriously.

I have great respect for Florovsky as a scholar, and my view of his neopatristic turn in these terms is meant to show something of the magnitude, perhaps the desperate magnitude, of his endeavour. I believe however, that it is necessary to accept that despite all the reasons that necessitate the return to the Fathers, neopatristic thought crossed a bridge when it rejected the continuity of its own tradition. After all, there are different views, such as that of Christos Yannaras, according to whom the most genuine expression of the Church may be found at the politically destitute time of the *Tourkokratia*, the time when Greece was subject to the Ottomans. This was a time when political authority was completely separated from ecclesiastical authority, when theological ideology had virtually died, yet the sense of participation as a way of life was quite strong.²⁸ One could find in that sense of church life (what Yannaras would define as a *tropos*/way of life instead of a fideistic attitude) the elusive continuity which had perhaps been lost in the Russian tradition, if Florovsky was right. While the Ottomans restricted Christian theological discourse, they did not oppress or change the way Christianity was practiced in Greece, whereas Peter the Great changed both the way Christianity was taught and the way it was practiced in Russia. Be that as it may, we cannot

²⁸ Cf. Christos Yannaras, ‘Χωρισμός, ο συνεπέστερος δυνατός’ *Kathimerini*, 11 November 2018, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/994567/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/xwrismos-o-synepesteros-dynatos>.

escape the problem of the discontinuity, especially in a denomination that values tradition so intensely.

It seems to me that the problem of discontinuity stems partially from the question of the identity of the Orthodox Church. The project of the forced Westernization of Russia by Peter the Great in the eighteenth century, and the subsequent hybrid of Latin-Russian theological thought, which for Florovsky is the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, was prepared for centuries. In many ways, the Orthodox Church is perhaps the last institution that did not go through a Reformation, and still understands itself in relation to the medieval, Byzantine Church, in the case of the Greek Church, or its offspring, the Russian Church that was at the same time proud of its Byzantine roots and also tried to emancipate itself from them. But ‘medieval’ (as referring to the ‘middle’ between an enlightened antiquity and its renaissance a few centuries later) is not an accurate designation here. It is more precise to modify our historiographic terms with reference to what they truly reflect. The Western Middle Ages largely correspond to a rather bright period in the East. The Eastern Roman Empire, as well as its culture, art, and thought survived after the collapse of the Old Rome in the fifth century. It also survived the hit of the Latin Fourth Crusade, even if this was the beginning of the end for it politically and militarily. The Dark Ages of the East rather start with the fall of Constantinople in the fifteenth century, at least if we limit the understanding of ‘dark’ in relation to politics, but also to the production of theological thought, and the (lack of) participation in the theological conversation that was taking place in the Christian world elsewhere. Yet it is certainly not sound to argue that these limitations affected the day to day operation of the Church in its relationship with its members. Even before the fall of Constantinople, the first sign of the decline may be the time when Eastern philosophers and theologians started using Eastern and Western theologies as different languages, with no expectation of compromise or synthesis. This started already in the fourteenth century, as

Yannaras reminds us,²⁹ when the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, a paradigm of Western thought, was translated to Greek by Demetrios Kydonis. In the centuries that followed, church life, art, and architecture kept flourishing despite the final collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire, but most attempts towards the articulation of theological thought were gradually borrowing uncritically from the Western tradition. Therefore, the designation ‘Dark Ages’ even for that time may refer to some but not all of the aspects of life in the former Eastern Roman Empire.

Regardless of any criticism towards the possible purity or feasibility of the return to the Fathers and the escape from Babylonian captivity, and while the Russian post-Petrine experience of Christian life was possibly more confused than the Greek experience under the Ottomans, it is precisely Florovsky who brought to our attention the intrusion of deeply incompatible strands such as German idealism into Orthodox thought. Yet, the impact of his thought on Church life was limited. While it is difficult to consider Orthodox theological thought today without the formative influence of the call for the return to the thought and the mindset of the Fathers—perhaps an impossible task if taken literally, but at least one that recognizes the undigested influence of Western theology since the fourteenth century, and proposes some ways to address it—much of the pastoral activity of the Orthodox Church is still under its Babylonian captivity in matters such as ethics, spiritual guidance and confession, authority within the Church, liturgical literacy, ethnic lines, and sexuality.

As now we are counting a hundred years after the first exile of the Russians to the West, which initiated many of these questions, we can try to evaluate what the legacy of the Russian diaspora is today. It may be fair to recognize that the Eastern Dark Ages have left wounds from which the Orthodox Church has still not recovered, and for which a sustained

²⁹ Christos Yannaras, *Ορθοδοξία και Δύση στη Νεώτερη Ελλάδα* (Αθήναι: Δόμος, 2006).

consideration of the thought of the Fathers may be helpful, even if it is not a panacea. While, as noted above, it may be possible to find many positive aspects of church life in the Ottoman period, the political liberation of Greece, as also the Russian realization of the value of its pre-Petrine past, brought about a crisis of identity that included the East/West axis, as well as an axis that may be described as pre-medieval/post-Enlightenment. The theological thought of the Russian diaspora was nothing less than a spark of genuine concern for this identity and for the place and the directions of Orthodox theology in the modern world. While it is hard to ascertain to what extent that spark was able to bear long-lasting fruit beyond theological conversations (admittedly, a pessimist view), it is undoubtedly a long-lasting movement of inspiration.